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Meg of the
Scarlet Foot

W. Edwards
Tirebuck





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Meg of the Scarlet Foot


A Novel

By W. Edwards Tirebuck



NEW YORK AND LONDON
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MEG OF THE SCARLET FOOT





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CHAPTER I

THE MILLGATES

NOAH MILLGATE was a dwarfish mender of watches and clocks—a little round man of little wheels. Even his home was round, for he lived within a circle of stone three feet thick at the sloping base, the house being a disused windmill.

The old mill had been an active inheritance of the Millgates for generations, but this was in the earlier pastoral days when the church and the mill stood almost alone in Millgate Lane—a lane which led across the cliff-like green hill of Brink-o'-the-Dale to the yet greener plain beneath known as Dale-o'-the-Brink.

The first of the Millgates who had to take to watch-making for a living turned the obsolete mill into a house. He retained the old nail-studded door and the little heavily framed windows for the circular ground-floor kitchen. He bodily paved the centre of the round kitchen with a trimmed old mill-stone, sunk level with the surrounding border of firm earth, which was sealed every spring with thick yellowish whitewash as with dried cream.

So many square regular windows were fitted into the first room above for the three partitioned segments of



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the circle for bedrooms, that, from the outside, that particular portion looked like a fort. Above this was a garret, like a watch-tower for the fore and aft quarters of the day, because it had windows east and west. This was capped by a broad-brimmed roof, like a miller's old hat half over his eyes.

By degrees Millgate Lane became less a lane and more of a street. A gray-stone house was built on each side of the mill-house, and with full semicircular bow-windows in keeping with the dominant roundness of the central relic. Then a red-brick house was added to the right, as if in architectural protest, for that was low and oblong—indeed, like one big red brick composed of innumerable little ones.

The old vicarage near the church had become damp, so a new gray sandstone vicarage was built next to the big red brick, and in semi-ecclesiastical imitation of the old church; the church standing almost opposite, like an ivied island in a green sea of grass, swelling and sloping with its anchored stone crafts of graves towards the vale.

After the long vicarage garden-wall, Millgate Lane abruptly dipped. It also slightly curved to the right, around the circular church-yard railings, like an arm around a waist. After the vicarage wall, the lane dipped socially too, for the region of cottages and shops began.

On the other hand, the five white cottages which were held at arm's-length by the vicarage wall seemed to insist that their doors and windows should at least be on a social level with the proud high wall. The result was that the more the lane dipped, the greater number of large semicircular stone steps had to be piled to reach the elevated green and blue doors.

The highest doorways of these cottages were so elevated that when a woman happened to stand sunlit in one it suggested a large living version of the old-fash-

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ioned weather indicator with the woman out for fair. And though even a man inconsistently stood there in the sunlight, or a woman perversely appeared there in the rain, this vivid suggestion was still effective: it provoked indeed the even more familiar feeling that, as usual, the weather indicator was out of repair.

No Brink-o'-the-Dale hearth was more clean, cheery, or bright than the wide-open hearth of the Old Mill House; and no Brink-o'-the-Dale folk were more house-proud or more neat in their persons than the three Millgates—Noah, the dwarfish watchmaker; Margit, his somewhat diminutive wife; and their singular undersized son Ark, who looked like a little man who had never been a lad, and yet a lad who would never be a man.

The circular white floor, as a whole, was like the clear face of a big clock—yes, and with the peculiar silence of a clock, except upon its own particular theme of Time, for Noah Millgate was deaf. His little wife had to get at him by the signs of her fingers, and at times even by the wonders of her fist.

Owing to this settled deafness Noah lost ground as a maker of watches, and his business became almost confined to the cleaning of clocks. Even very few of these wagged their long tails upon the curved wall, between the right of the door and the long, low kitchen window with its deep sides and diamond panes, where he worked almost level with the tower clock of the church on the sloping ground opposite.

Sometimes such things as watch springs and clock wheels went wrong. On such occasions, creation seemed suspended, and Noah swore. Then Margit, because she knew that he could not hear his own profanity and be ashamed, would leave whatever she was doing, tilt across the floor like a diminutive witch on pattens or clogs, and rap him on his head with her supernaturally bony hand. It was her way of vigorously saying "Don't!"



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Sometimes Margit's physical "Don't!" was colored white with flour; sometimes it was wet, straight from the tub; sometimes it was a perfectly dry and colorless exclamation with the back of a brush. In any case, Noah always accepted it as domestic lynch-law to keep in check his automatic depravity of uttering oaths which he himself had ceased to hear.

But he sometimes retorted, "Surely, if I can't hear other folk cackle, I deserve the liberty of feeling mysen crow a bit? Surely!"

But dwarfish Margit was very fastidious about oaths. She had inherited an uncomfortable belief that the devil answered to his name whenever it was called. She believed that whatever oath was uttered visited in some form the place of the sound and lingered there the whole day. In fact, the devil answered oaths as God answered prayers.

The violent little woman, whose narrow brow was as fretted with cross-lines as an overtouched etching, could prove it by evidence. A reference to hell always made her hot. The word damn condemned her to hours of subterranean depression. The common practice of cursing somebody's eyes turned her for an instant "stark stone-blind."

"And they're no baby fancies!" the diminutive creature would petulantly declare; "but a grown-up woman's common-sense proved over and over again inside and out of me. Because other folk haven't had the like hints for proving Providence before its time, that doesn't make Margit Millgate a born fool of her fancies or a liar of liars!"

One bright, early summer afternoon Noah could not fix a wriggling watch spring. It darted out of place like an infinitesimal eel the instant he took away the tool. Four times he tried to fix the little circular steel demon to do its work, and sighed deeply. He tried a fifth time

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—failed—and swore mutely. He became unaccountably nervous. He grew even feverish. His fingers shook. His face twitched.

After a desperately earnest sixth attempt the spring jumped out of its place with an invisible alertness that seemed to have increased with practice, and gave Noah an elfish twitting hit on the nose.

“You wriggling, waggling wire of a worriting witch!” he cried, and further gratified his passion by shouting two of his most dynamic oaths, accompanied by a compound double blow upon his bench with his two fists.


Margit flitted across the kitchen and rubbed in such a scrubby application of birch-broom into the back of his head that he could hardly tell which was hair and which was broom.

He almost turned upon her. But no, no. The memoried history of previous domestic defeats restrained him. He once more nipped the steel spring with his pliers. He again tried to fix it. He failed. Failed! Destiny itself seemed to be against him. In keeping with that solemn feeling he quietly swivelled off his stool and went to the front door.

He stood there like a dwarf, more than ever belittled by fate. And yet he looked grotesquely related to the bigger things of life as well, for, draped in his full white shirt-sleeves and long white apron, and with an arched bald head that appeared capable of holding any quantity of canonical law, he looked like an immature, miniature, amateur dean.

Noah stood gazing opposite. Right through the two sets of south and north stained-glass windows of the church he could see a river in the vale, the river gleaming like a still more brilliant stained-glass window beyond.

He thought of fishing. The sun was rather bright, but the breeze was good. He would try the Silver



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Streak! He slipped the bow of his apron strings, cast the apron over his stool, put on his jacket and slouching felt hat, strapped on his basket, and, with the length of a ladder added to his own, reached his rod from the rafter hooks.

Noah, turning from the old mill-house door to the right, crossed at an angle, passed under a little Gothic archway, and entered a narrow descending black lane between two high walls, solemnly suggestive of half a mile of open-air cloister for penitential monks, but whimsically called "The Black Cat's Tail."

Having walked the length of the Tail, Noah took a leftward path across a field, mounted a stile, followed the path along a hawthorn hedge with comparatively white blossoms on that side away from the pit winds, but having blackened blossoms, called "Colliers' buds," on the other.

Noah plucked a dusty tuft of hawthorn and nibbled it. With pneumatic force he expelled it, complaining in soliloquy: "You may just as well cud a pinch of soot in these days!" In the same breath, however, he joyously called as he looked up into an oak: "Hey, but you have a bonny thrill in your throttle, old thrush!—if I could but hear as well as I can see." He stood watching, muttering snatches of admiration based solely upon vision and memory, for he could not hear a note.

The thrush took to flight, and Noah jerked forward as if he were a mechanical toy man suddenly set a-going, muttering the old rhyme:

"A cock robin an' a Jenny Wren
Are God Almighty's cock and hen;
A spink an' a sparrow
Are th' devil's bow an' arrow."

"I don't believe the last two lines on it of you, old birdie. There's no devil's bow an' arrow about you!"

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He was soon at the mouth of the rickety wooden hand-bridge arching a narrow river called the Blue Beck. Noah's destination was the Silver Streak, a cleaner river beyond, but he slowly crossed the bridge, looking at the eager rush and flow, resuming his half-audible comments.

"The Beck's floody after the rains. Fancy! up to the willow arms! Um! They're on with Turkey reds as well as blues to-day at Merrywains. And browns, too. Aye, Merrywains have lived one fortune and are dyeing another, as you may say. Good a-heavens, what's yon? Um! A dye-house bundle?"

Noah reeled out his line.

"I thought it were a chap's shoulder. Come back here!" he called, casting his line. "You may as well earn me a shilling from Merrywains. But I'll land you!" he muttered, as he ran down stream in advance of his game and cast his line deftly on a breeze.

"Didn't I tell thee!" he called, and to prevent a snap Noah reeled out more line, and played with his catch as with a trickster of a trout.

"Aye, this way, old blackhead, and show sense!"

He quickly reeled in line and drew the bundle to the bank. It was a parcel bound by a mackintosh and string. Noah lifted it and quickly dropped it, murmuring: "By golly! But there's life *and* death there!" and peeping out of one corner of the parcel he saw the bare sole of a little scarlet foot.

He pivoted upon his heel right-about face. Then he swiftly jerked back again, fell on his knees, cut the string, opened a man's mackintosh, then a woman's red skirt, and saw a plump, thick-set baby girl, like a Michael Angelo cherub in the flesh.

Noah forgot that he was deaf and put his ear to the side of the perfect little form, already with the woman in miniature in its broad little bosom and dappled mounds of breasts.

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He felt the unconscious creature from its dark-haired head to its scarlet foot. "Dyed with Turkey red," he mused.

The child was stone-cold. In him, however, nature ran to the other extreme. He turned hot and exclaimed, "There's a bit of the 'Devil's bow and arrow' *here*, though!"

He bundled the creature within the skirt and mackintosh, then within his arms, ran across the bridge, along the path, up the Black Cat's Tail and home, straight to the big round table in the centre of the round kitchen. There he opened the parcel, calling up the stairs, "Margit! Margit! Here's a Moses of a lass I've fished up! Come down and put your ear to her. She may be living, she may be dead; maybe a bit of both. Margit! Where are you, woman? Come down—or—up—or—in—come from somewhere! Margit Millgate!"

"What are you double Margitting Millgating at, silly?" muttered dwarfed Margit, entering at the front door, basket in hand. "If you had a voice more to your size 'twould be pleasanter fit for my ear!" and, using her most effective language for him, she pushed him out of the direct line of her quickened walk to the centre of his crisis on the table.

"In Blue Beck!" he gasped in anticipation.

"Blue Beck or no Beck," she muttered to herself, dropping her basket, "she's—she's no sawdust doll! She's flesh and bone. But, ugh! as chill-cold and wet as a snail. And not a beat! I've nought in life or death or mid-between 'em to do with this, my Noah Millgate." She rapidly signalled on her fingers that he was to run fast for the doctor; and run fast he did.

Margit took off her shawl, and substituted it for the wet skirt and mackintosh. Then she stood as if in the invisible presence of some of the worst oaths of Noah supernaturally embodied within the chairs and tables,

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and especially on the bright, reflecting dish-covers and brasses above the fire-place.

As a result of Noah's excitement on his short journey to Dr. Kearsley's, stout Mrs. Dootson turned in. Even though she was quite recently the mother of her seventh wonder, at the sight of the child on the table she panted with an overabundance of motherly marvel, and gasped in advance of herself, "Well, I never!"

"And I never," answered Margit.

"A dye-works cast-off, think ye?"

"I think nothing, Sarah Ann. Nothing—yet. But nothing's next to everything."

"As black a haired head as ever I saw. I know no lass as black as this. Let's see th' limbs, Margit."

"Touch and look for yourself; look an' touch nought of it for me."

"Fleshy—and firm! But she's surely d-e-a-d, Margit? She isn't with *us*? If she was mine, I'd put her to the head in warm water and take the chance, and get this dye off her foot soon, for you hear so much of blood poison and such likes. But circulation's dead still. She's bonny, and no fault of limb, as with some sly wights. If she were in her senses, Margit, I'd put her to me, and give what belongs to my own babs, bless her!"

Margit was glad of Mrs. Dootson's chatter. It allowed her own mind to think itself into a private state of high fever that soon spread to the whole of Margit's body. Had she passed anything or anybody on the road against her luck? Had anything unlucky happened last Friday? No; not that she could recall. Nevertheless, she wiped the oozing, feverish damp from off her narrow, wrinkled forehead, and sighed, "Hey, good conscience, Sarah Ann, I do wish I were at the back and front of this to see what the middle of it means for Noah, Ark, and me!"

Dr. Kearsley quickly entered. He was followed by Noah and three women. These were soon followed by



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two others. They circled about the round table, all exclamations, whispers, and sighs, as if they were jury-women at an inquest with a foregone verdict of "Murder by some mother unknown."

The doctor said, "The child is all right—as alive as any of you. Give it a warm bath, Margit."

"Just what *I* said!" called Mrs. Dootson.

Margit was silent, looking obstinate, and as if she would willingly let Mrs. Dootson talk herself into the new responsibility.

"Get her into a blanket, and when she revives feed slowly with weak warm milk and a teaspoonful of brandy."

The word brandy was ironically given to Noah by finger sign by Margit, and Noah twisted his nose as if to shut off the odor of even the word.

"Neat?" inquired Mrs. Dootson.

"No, no; to a cup of warm milk."

Noah was shaking his head, and Margit was looking perplexed.

Mrs. Dootson, with the right of the most recent mother there, inquired, "Have you handled her before, doctor, may I ask?"

The doctor looked dense, and glanced at one of the five ticking clocks on the wall. He remarked, "The sooner the bath the better," and went.

The women sprang into new life. Margit, as though the unavoidable had come at last, unwillingly pressed the kettle deeper into the fire, Mrs. Dootson encouraged the flames with the poker, Granny Grimes asked where she could find the blanket, Mrs. Meakincroft significantly reached a cup and spoon, involuntarily working her tongue along her lips, Widow Kershaw found a pan-mug, and Margit, with something tragically inevitable in her look, suggestively thrust before Noah's eyes a bottle and threepence.

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Noah turned away under moral protest. He never had and he never would.

Margit twisted him round by the shoulder, thrust the money into one hand, the bottle into the other, and pushed him out of the door.

There were only seven women in the kitchen, but they produced the conversational result of seven times seven. They circled around the mysterious little being, coiled stark naked in the plump red arms of stout Mrs. Dootson, who, on a chair near the fire, and with a foot on the fender, sat like a Venus of Titian personating a Madonna. With all the frankness of fine divine art, Mrs. Dootson proffered the little one some of the bounty of even finer human nature. But in vain. The child appeared even more inanimate than the painted child in some of the high-art pictures, the great foster Madonna, Mrs. Dootson, alone seeming to be alive.

"This water is hot enough to scald a milk-pail," said Granny Grimes, "to say nothing of warming a bairn. Get her into the mug. You must work at the outside before the in, Sarah Ann."

"Haply," said Mrs. Dootson, lowering the child into the pan-mug as into a well. Then, forsooth, in addition to Mrs. Dootson's pair of matronly hands, six other kinds of maternal hands dived into the water to lave the creature, while seven varied versions of the one earnest prayer of hope arose upon the incense of the stream.

So concentrated was their concern that not one of the seven women saw a vision-like figure leap into the sunlit kitchen as if from a passing cloud-shadow. But all heard it cry out like some ultra-human representative of life mortally wounded at the core.

The women gazed as if at a transfiguration, and beheld a gaunt, emaciated, dark young woman of seventeen—her hands and wrists stained Turkey red, her sack apron spotted and splashed with the same dye, but ap-

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pearing as if splashed with blood, her long face hollow and pale, and, for eyes, two large black blots sinking and spreading dimmer like ink upon a white pad.

Those black blots flashed into liquid fire as they caught sight of the child through the gap of women who were whispering, "Who is she?"

The stranger screamed and sprang forward, crying: "Are you all mocking-mothers? Mocking *me*? Drowning the drowned?"

"No, no, wench. Is she thine, then?"

"Aye! No!—Yea! Give me my own!" she cried.

Three women held her as she again called, "Give me my own!"

"Tut! She's had it once too often," said Widow Kershaw, rising from the mug. "Keep her back, Granny Grimes."

Margit's hard, thin, penetrating voice called, "Nay, let her take it to where it came from, and don't—" She was so agitated that her breath took a false step in her throat, and the lump in the slack hollow there fell like a foot down a stair. Her thickly veined hand went to her left side as she passionately called:

"I don't want the bairn blarting for its mother and father on *my* hearth! Let her take it—"

"Nay, nay, nay!" appealed Mrs. Dootson. "None of you are quite in the right. Let the mother touch her own. Come and feel, lass, how warm the little one's getting."

The overwrought creature, firmly held in the slowly yielding arms of two women, pressed forward through the darkness of her dazed brain towards the voice she had heard. Then she stopped with outstretched hands—the red-dyed fingers working like bloodstained feelers that took color and action from some murderous instinct rather than from some reasoning of love.

Indeed, her red hand had to be guided to the mug by

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Mrs. Dootson. When it passed through the heated water to the warm form of the child she shrieked, sprang upright, cast herself backwards into the women's arms, crying out :

"She's red hot ! Red hot in hell !"

Margit, more superstitiously terrified, shrank away.

"O Lord of flames !" the young woman shrieked, "father of fathers, scorch the father of that child dead ! No, no—scorch me—myself—myself. No ! Father *and* mother ; woman *and* man. No, Lord, no ; the three of us—the three !"

"Poor, poor crazy lass ! Help her, women," appealed Mrs. Dootson, continuing her bathing. "She's been back to work too soon, she has."

"All on myself ; all myself."

"Who *is* the wild witch of a wench ?" asked Margit. "Does any of us know her ? She's crazying me !"

"She's none that I know," answered Mrs. Dootson, more vigorously splashing the water about the baby's heart.

"And none to me," replied the others.

"Hullo !" called Mrs. Dootson. "Just you look here, Margit, love. There's *life* ! Look, Granny Grimes. Bring the lass here. Let her see now. Let her feel this."

"She couldn't feel if a thunderbolt went bang right through a faint. She's swooned."


"Dead gone !" confirmed Widow Kershaw.

"*She'll* want hot water next," remarked Mrs. Meakin-croft, working her tongue along her lips.

"The frenzy lass has had too much of that already," said Margit.

In came her son Ark, a youth of thirteen, just four feet high, black with coal-dust, and looking like an over-blackened member of an amateur nigger troupe.

He was home from cleaning flues at the Dale-o'-Brink



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pit, his dinner-can and Davy lamp hanging over his shoulders by a hook, his clothes ragged with friction in passing through iron man-holes and narrow boiler spaces. One side of his trousers had a long, chilly-looking, damp patch, a darker black than the rest, where he had been lying in soot and mud. His clogs were soaking to his socks—nay, to his soles.

He stood confused, looking at the seven women as if he were behind a long, black Plantagenet shield reaching from his cap to his clogs, with peep-holes for his active eyes.

“Here’s a fine Christmas hamper for you, Ark !” called genial Mrs. Dootson.

“Oh? Aye?” he answered, huskily, through several hours’ accumulation of boiler dust, and, resisting even genial Mrs. Dootson’s humor, he slowly went forward.

Suddenly, seeing a baby naked, he wheeled upon his clog-heel, glanced his clean, dark, inquiring eye at the child again, and turned away. As he stopped to put down his can and lamp in a corner, Widow Kershaw called :

“Why, you’re flushing, Ark ! I can see it even through the black !”

Ark, still stooping, his dwarfish broad back towards Widow Kershaw, ironically drew up his left bandy leg, and with a slow eccentric action, as they say in mechanics, he kicked out two crooked expressions of contempt in the direction of Widow Kershaw’s metallic voice. Then he swerved round, ready for any of them. As he passed between the silenced women to go up-stairs, Margit, in appreciation of his retort by leg, gave his shoulder a kindly pat.

The young woman’s wailing cry—“Myself, myself ; Maker of curses, curse myself”—filled the kitchen again.

“And curse *us*, I reckon,” muttered Margit, “unless you go.”

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"I'll tell you what it is, women," said Mrs. Dootson, newly concerned, "this is no dye on the little one's foot. It's a mark of birth, I do believe."

"'Meg of the Scarlet Foot' call her," said Widow Kershaw. "Should we, Margit?"

"You'll christen her no name in *this* house," answered Margit, with tremulous fervency. "But when you do christen her, Mrs. Kershaw, don't take *my* name in vain with your bit of Meg; she's not mine, and she shall never be mine. She goes—"

"Where in the world is your Noah?" asked Mrs. Meakincroft, with such obviously pointed thoughts on brandy that Granny Grimes, behind Mrs. Meakincroft's back, slyly mimicked the act of drinking.

"Where, indeed, is the man?" remarked Margit. "But he may be in the next world to the last for aught I know, Mrs. Meakincroft. Even if he is, no doubt you'd like to follow him there with a glass."

"And hot water," said Granny Grimes.

"And a little sugar," added Mrs. Dootson.

The child faintly cried, as if from its own inner world of vital strife.

The girlish mother laughed, as though at gratifying echoes from a life that belonged to her.

"Give her the bairn, and let her go!" passionately called Margit, and stole the child from Mrs. Dootson and the water.

"Nay, nay!" called the women, closing in against Margit.

"As well give the mother to the child," said Mrs. Dootson. "You'll chill the wight to death! Give her me, Margit, and have common Christian sense."

Margit gave the child, but only to have her hands free to support her superstitious little bent head, shaking in uncontrollable sobs.

"The strange bairn crying straight *at* me!" gasped

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Margit, "and the mother laughing—straight at me, too! . . . Why, why did my Noah bring them across me! . . . Ark!" she called up-stairs. "Come down! Never mind washing, lad. Quick. Come! You must go for the bell-man, or magistrate, or vicar, or police!"

At this the wild young mother with scarlet hands forced at a bound the barrier of women and fled.

"Here!" cried Margit, after her, "take this wastrel of a life! Take it, and leave my poor life free."

"Tut, tut, Margit," muttered Mrs. Dootson, stooping over the child, as the other women circled around again. "The little thing's as fresh and innocent as a pound of new grass butter."

"Hey, women, women!" sighed Margit, like an unappreciated little prophetess from some great but invisible realm of life. "You don't see as I see. You don't hear as I hear. I've eyes within eyes; ears within ears. Why, most the pity—aye, most the pity for my peace of body and mind—my very touch has eyes for the dark."

"Aye?" said Widow Kershaw, ironically. "Indeed? And in the broad day, I suppose, you see double? Hey, Margit?"

"She sees *trouble* double," added Mrs. Dootson, lifting the baby from the water to her knee.

Down came dwarfish Ark, bright and clean, with a distinguished gleam of intelligence in his dark eyes. He was now a miniature model of his father in form and feature, but more quaint in total result. His full, broad breast was toned like that of a chaffinch by a purple vest modified with wear, and gemmed with blue-glass buttons, while his broad corduroy jacket was a velvety russet brown. Around his neck was a scarf of a very small black-and-white check pattern of emphasized neatness.

"They're making fun of me, son," complained Margit, like a mother who was intellectually but a child to her son.

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"Who? Which of them?" he asked, with something of wild fire in his face turned upon the group of seven women as a whole. The women as a whole at once assumed a keener interest in the child on Mrs. Dootson's knee. Though Ark was only four feet high, the spirit in him looked greater than mere size as he said, "They'd make fun of their own shadows if they didn't know them for their own."

"Why, the bairn's looking at Ark—see!" called Mrs. Dootson, admiringly. Margit stealthily sidled herself between Ark and the dreamy gaze of the child.

"Ark, lad," said Margit, persuasively, "go for the bellman or police. I'm not easy. This Blue Beck waif must go."

"Couldn't we keep it?" he asked. "Aye, keep it mother. I'd like us to! She'd be a change of life for us all."

Margit's thin lip twitched into firmness, and her fist became clenched. She would fight against it tooth and nail. And yet mere resistance was not enough just then. She must have luck. To cover the distressing situation with a benediction, Margit slyly moved towards the back door, and slyly spat over her crooked little finger. Then, just as slyly, she turned round again, looking temporarily sustained with a new hope that luck would let her have her way.



CHAPTER II

THE OMINOUS COLOR OF RED

THE reviving baby of Blue Beck was steaming aglow and apparently more plump upon Mrs. Dootson's broad lap. At least four hands, with two towels, blotted all the damp off it, from its oval dark-haired head to its pink miniature toes—one foot still a vivid scarlet. A few minutes before she was quite ready for it Mrs. Dootson suggested that a flannel should be wound round the little body.

Margit's mouth twitched like one great nerve. After the suggestion had been pressed upon her twice, she very slowly went up-stairs.

In a bottom drawer, as if tauntingly awaiting her, Margit came across a strip of flannel the ominous red color of that dye-girl's hands.

Something was wrong! She closed her eyes very tightly, pressed her lips together in a strenuous resistance against ill-luck, and gave herself up to her vague ideas of inscrutable Providence. Then she clutched the red strip and buried it three depths of clothes deep, to the brief but fervent burial service of "The Lord have mercy on Margit Millgate, and us all!"

When Margit stood back from the drawer, this fervent burial service was mutely re-offered by her uplifted light-gray eyes, with the additional appeal of tears. Through those tears she saw a sparkling sunbeam casting a long living shaft of atmospheric silver from a chink in the

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window-frame. She traced it to the floor. Now then! What did *that* mean? The Almighty was no doubt pointing something out. Her hands were clasped in a receptive attitude. She looked at the floor again; and yet again. She could see nothing more than the vivified grain of the old oak boarding. But what shape was the grain? Coffin shape? No. Heart shape, if anything; but no shape in particular—not that she could just then see with the poor eyes of this blinding world.

"I wonder," she mused, "if it means that this is God's own light pointing straight through the floor to that bairn below? I do believe it is! But with what meaning? Does the Almighty's finger mean—Margit Millgate, take care of that child of mine; *or*, Margit Millgate take care, beware of that half-drowned wight of the devil?"

Margit slowly shook her head. All was beyond her. With her apron over her fingers, she pressed her eyes long and hard, as though what she had seen had displaced them. Again she looked up. The sunbeam was still there, only brighter. What did the additional brightness mean? Again she shook her head, the wrinkles on her forehead looking rutted and dark.

"At any rate, I won't walk through the finger of God—if it is God!" and, to avoid passing through the sunbeam, she, with pagan reverence, walked around its point on the floor and went down-stairs. There she made dumb-show signs, implying that the search had been in vain.

"We must have some!" said Mrs. Dootson, with the authority of a mother who knew the vital connection between a baby and its clothes.

Margit remained mute. To further look for flannel in that house would be an irreligious act of ill-luck.

"It must come from somewhere!" remarked Mrs. Dootson.

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"My own girl-bab never had flannel," argued Margit.

"Maybe, if it had, it wouldn't have died like it did."

"You needn't pitch death over my lips and into my teeth and down my throat, Sarah Ann!"

"It's life I'm talking of, Margit," answered Mrs. Dootson, finally wiping the child. "Life, and a bit of red flannel."

Margit started. She stood staring at the bent head of Mrs. Dootson, afraid that by some supernaturally moral means the head had seen through the ceiling to the red flannel in the drawer.

The gaze was only relaxed when Mrs. Dootson added, "Surely, Margit, you've a bit of some sort?"

"Was this bairn born for *me* to do the dressing on it?"

"You're—not. I am."

"Aye, in another body's house and with another body's things. It's a fine quake of heaven and earth when a red hand drops her trouble in the water and expects me to flannel it! Sarah Ann, hasn't the dye come off yon foot?"

"It's a birth-mark, Margit."

"A death-mark, you mean!"

"Life's life," answered Mrs. Dootson, fitting the hills of her full cheeks into the valley of the baby's back and lusciously kissing it, as if blessing Nature's handiwork and her own. Then she deftly turned the little one, coiled her apron over it, and hugged the form under the rounded eave of her bosom. "You, Granny Grimes, know where I keep my binders; I'll lend one, as Margit here—"

Margit declared, with the feverish warmth of a fanatic: "I wouldn't have a borrowed shred in this house for a borrowed bairn for the worth of a whole church!"

"Oh, I'll lend it for ever and ever, and a church Amen, if you're afraid of criss-crossing your luck in that, too."

"Well, I—*am*. The bairn alone is bad enough chance for one day."

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"You've only had her half an hour, woman!" argued Mrs. Meakincroft. "But where's Noah—and the brandy for the bairn?"

Margit's neglect to heed this question seemed to turn Mrs. Meakincroft's nose redder.

"The mother of this child can't bring her arms and legs quick enough for her own to suit *me*," warmly retorted Margit. Her face was strained and unduly flushed. Her little gray eyes were excited into nothing but light, as if with more inward visions than thoughts could dispose of, while the sharp tip of her tongue nervously darted in and out upon her lips. Like some diminutive oracle to whom unknown demi-gods had hinted warnings from the unknown world of air around, she said: "The thing's given me a feeling of something dire. There's a dark place aback of this. I feel it. I see it. There's both a hand and a foot in the dark; and red with something more nor dye. An' I'll tell you more! I'll tell you this—and it's a sure sign of some years of my lifetime—I'll tell what I've never told soul or body before, and it's this: Whenever the damp dries down in my hand there's always evil sucking it up. Always. Sure. Certain! I've noticed it—"

"Margit, Margit," ridiculed Mrs. Dootson; "you're as old as the hills in those notions. Don't speak that boggart-y stuff. Look at the bairn! She's taking from me as natural as my own. Hey, bless thee, bright-eye! You bonny, plump lump of somebody's love. You may well peep up at me, you poor half-and-half orphan as you are. *Did* they want to Blue Beck you? Shame and shame to them. And now here's Margit dead against you."

"I'm not, Sarah Ann! There *is* fear. I own to fear about me, but don't be telling the wrong end of it even to an unnoticing bairn, though it's come so strange it may be more noticer nor you think. Old folk come to second childhood, and why not first childhood into old



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folk? You never know; no more than you can be quite sure a bird's a bird, for some of them talk queer enough to be something or somebody else. I own to fear. I'm afraid she's against *me*; not me against *her*. I saw the foot of her first, and that's bad. She'll—kick."

"Why, you're thinking," said Mrs. Meakincroft, involuntarily sweeping her apron across her lips, as after an imaginary sip—"you're thinking of the old saying for the first lamb:

" 'Good-luck to see the lambkin's head,
Bad-luck to see the tail i'stead.' "

You're thinking of that. But I wonder where your Noah is?"

"And if there's anything in color," resumed Margit, with more fervency, "she'll kick—blood. She'll go out of this, and quick!"

"And maybe your precious luck will go out with it, Margit," remarked Mrs. Dootson.

Glib Mrs. Meakincroft said, "It 'll be a fine thing, Margit, if your Noah has broken his thirty-five year pledge and is lying leg-an'-body helpless at the Mill Stones Inn."

"For mercy on us sake, Mrs. Meakincroft," cried Margit, "take your thirst to the tap and slake it with something as can run forever. I'd drink my own words before I'd speak of another woman's man like that. First with thoughts in the house, and then with thoughts out of it, I'm fair flared I am; and you all speak as if I can help it. I can't help thoughts thinking, can I? And I suppose my thoughts are as wise to me as other folk's thoughts are wise to them? Maybe if you could see as the moon sees—and I mean by that a good way off—you'd see that what comes out of nowhere to me is quite as good as what comes out of some near somewhere to you. Maybe better! I tell you only what *I'm* told. Something is speaking to me against that found bairn

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housing itself here. You may argify me till you're all as blue as the Beck in the face-front and black right through to the backs of your heads, and I'll still think out the thoughts as come to me as easy as the rains come from the brains of the clouds."

"Oh, never mind, Margit," called Mrs. Dootson. "This here child's dark enough to let in a new year for thee."

"Who wants a new year? I'd rather the year that was growing all right before my Noah broke it with this. I've my thoughts about it," and Margit, with a fiery rush of emotion, poised her little figure almost on tiptoe as if straining towards impossible heights in keeping with her idea; and then, pointing her sharp finger at the baby as though she would transfix the creature even without contact, she declared: "This child is Noah's morning curse coming home to us! He cursed at a dead wire-worm of a thing as if it were a wee wight of a witch alive, and here it is!—big, and too much alive. God, himself, help him; and all of us, from the crowns of our heads to the soles of our feet!"

Granny Grimes hastened in with a roll of flannel and some baby clothes.

"Now then, Millgates' Meg," playfully said Mrs. Dootson, "you've not done amiss at thieving another bairn's meal, whatever, whoever, and wherever you may rob after this. Sit up and let's bind thee, and get a few things on thee; and you'll sleep like a curled-up kitten, I can see."

The drowsy little being, too sleepy to have control of its dangling head, was wrapped again and again in the binder as if seriously cracked across the spine.

The other clothes were deftly cast over by Mrs. Dootson, and the child was already so limp in the profoundest slumber that the operation was like dressing Sleep itself, the child being unconsciously inclusive, somewhere within.

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"And now, Margit, where can the little one lie?—for I've my own to look after now, and at second-hand if it only knows, for she's taken the cream off the milk, has this one. I must go."

"And I must, too," said Granny Grimes.

"And me," followed 'Becca Bateson.

"I left a pan on the fire," remarked Widow Kershaw, sidling to the door.

"My conscience!" exclaimed Sal Thornton, "I tied my Teddy to the table-leg before I runn'd out; he'll have screeched himself into a bunch o' fits!" and off she went.

"I've *no* call to go to," blandly remarked Mrs. Meakin-croft, still awaiting Noah.

"Have you a clothes-basket, Margit? Or a pillow on two chairs against the wall by the fire would do till the mother-lass comes for the bairn. Or sit here and take her on your own knee, Margit."

"No," said Margit, "and don't ask again, Sarah Ann. My hands feel too near my thoughts to touch that trouble in the flesh to be safe to its life and my own."

"Well, she must lie somewhere!" said Mrs. Dootson, rising.

Awkward footsteps high up the stairs startled Margit.

"That's not our Ark's tread? Surely *he's* not bringing mischief? Ark? What are *you* bringing down upon me?"

"Something as once brought me up!"

"As once brought him up? As—once—brought—him—up? *I* brought him up, and nobody else; and I'm right well sure he isn't carrying *me*, unless—God save us!—unbeknowns to one's very own soul and body, he's got some part of a ghost of me from yon attic, where I almost died one night. Ark, you young Be-elziboam mischief o' Satan's angels and torments, what *are* you carrying?—rumbling and tumbling against stair-boards like a flying flitting o' phantom furnityer! or like some-

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body tumbling from heaven down Jacob's ladder of dreams. Ark! Can't you—speak? Can't you—hear? Hey, but if I were aback o' your ears, I'd make your tongue jump ditches, I would! What is it?"

"It's something as once carried *me*—and sister," he answered, as he came into view with a quaint cradle.

"Oh, Ark," muttered Margit, with the reproaching pathos of ruthlessly touched memories. But her mutterings were lost in the woman's laughter of approbation.

"Well done, Ark!"

"You'll make a nurse yet!"

"My eyes, but it *is* a show-cot," said Mrs. Dootson. "Oh, aye—of course—I remember; it's a bit of your Noah's own hand-work—isn't it, Margit?"

Margit did not reply, and turned aside, the women reciprocating grimaces of pity for her. She heard the thud of the rockers, and called, without looking round, "Oh, don't rock an empty cradle, lad!—it's agen us; it's agen luck. Ark! Stay it!"

Widow Kershaw whispered to Mrs. Dootson, "*Her's thinking back;*" then she said aloud, more for Margit than for Ark, "Hey, but your baby-sister was a sweet un, Ark. I remember her well. Too little of a body and too much of a spirit for this earth—wasn't her, Mrs. Dootson?"

Margit, without turning round, responded, "She was. She was so."

"She was indeed, Margit," added Mrs. Dootson, with sympathetic authority. "Why, there's a chubby picture-face at the front of the cradle head."

"Aye, cut out of an old gran'father's clock-dial," proudly exclaimed Margit, now turning round.

"But your Noah has something out-of-the-way wise under his skull. Who but Noah would have thought of doing that, now?"



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"It was me as thought of yon pony's shoe at the foot. Give that a polish, too, Ark. It has a good-luck arch, as shiny as fire-irons, if you'll rub through to it."

"And I suppose Noah stuck into the wood all those little wheels?"

"Aye—brass and steel cogs of old watches and clocks. They're the sun, moon, and stars—see. He shaped some like you'll see 'em shaped in the sky. This big one is Pole Star, I remember, for I said to Noah, 'It's a queer, chilly thought to put a cold North Pole star on a cradle where a baby has to sleep. Couldn't you put a warm, sunny south one on? The star of Bethl'em I'd like,' I said. But Noah never heeded. But I had my own thoughts of it, I had. I had so!"—and Margit fumbled with her apron, and carried it up to her mouth and eyes. "And they strike back home in me now," she called, frankly weeping. "No poor bab was ever so ice-chilled in its death as was my little Meg! So stone and bone cold to my hand that for mother's love's sake I warmed my shawl and put it on her; though, for our poor earthly life's sake, I know'd it was of no, no, no use. . . . Women! Now as I *think!* Have I been wrong? Has this bab been sent in place o' my little Meg? Lord! Women! Meg in heaven! Everybody forgive me!"

"I shouldn't wonder," answered Mrs. Dootson, to reconcile Margit to prepare the cradle; and the women winked at each other over Margit's head.

"Well, Sarah Ann," resumed Margit, twisting the cradle from Ark's hands nearer to the fire, "quite as a thing of natural course you called her Millgates' Meg. I didn't like it then; but—you never know—you may have been the tongue of something more than yourself, Sarah Ann. The Almighty can speak from a rocking-chair as well as from a mountain, or a burning bush."

"Then we must call Mrs. Dootson a Mrs. Moses?" flip-pantly remarked Mrs. Meakincroft.

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"It's a name more Bible-like than we could call you, Mrs. Meakincroft!" feverishly replied Margit. "Moses broke the tables of stone laws into two, didn't he, Widow Kershaw?—you're far more Bibled nor any of us—but you, Mrs. Meakincroft, have broken 'em into two dozen twos, and you don't seem to shape mending 'em agen. Not with your cloven lips an' tongue, at any rate—and that's full fair face to face for you, Mrs. Meakincroft. Don't come making mock of life and death, of time gone, time here, and time to come. As I say, Sarah Ann, who knows everything and all? It *looks* Providence. Yes! give me the bairn! Hand her here. Hey, what a weight she is to my mite of a little heaven'd Meg! Thank thee, after all, Sarah Ann. You laid out my little Meggie in death for me, and you've laid out this one in life. The Almighty bless us all, not forgetting you, Mrs. Meakincroft, for, with this bit of new life fresh in my arms, I'd wish even the devil with a sore well. But I've taken this bairn too soon! Sit thee down and hold her, Ark, while I run up-stairs and bring my Meg's cot-clothes for her."

"Well, we must move," said Mrs. Dootson on behalf of the company, and going out.

"But do look in, Sarah Ann," appealed Margit from the staircase.

"All right, Margit," called back Mrs. Dootson from the pavement. "Job's luck, women!—see what's coming!"

"Why, they're carrying somebody on a ladder!" blurted Mrs. Meakincroft.

"Husht! husht! Has poor Margit gone up?"

"Is it Noah, think ye?" muttered Widow Kershaw.

"Without a jury's doubt."

"And, by the looks of the close-bobbing crowd, he's hurt, and badly," whispered 'Becca Bateson.

"I'm afraid—afraid I am," muttered Widow Kershaw.

"What's to do?" called Ark, rising.

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"Keep in with that bairn!" commanded Mrs. Dootson; "you'll give it cold." Then she whispered, "Here's Dick Athertone running ahead."

The women advanced to meet the youth.

"It's Noah Millgate," he gasped. "He's been picked up—and dead!"

A shriek sounded above them as if muffled in the air.

"Margit has seen them through the window," surmised Mrs. Dootson. "Do run up, Mrs. Kershaw, while I wait here. Keep her up th' stairs."

Mrs. Kershaw and 'Becca Bateson hastened in. They saw dwarfed Ark clattering up the stairs with hands as well as feet. They followed. They heard Margit wailing, coming down the stairs. Muttering, "Then there *is* mischief?" she pushed past Ark to rush down, but the two women's arms caught her.

"Now, Margit, little woman, quiet, quiet—"

"What *is* the mischief?"

"Wait. Nothing much."

"Tell me, as God's angels would."

"Tell her!" demanded Ark—"tell us!"

"Wait, Ark, wait. Margit, love—"

"Love's own mercy on all us poor earthly lot, Mrs. Kershaw. Have we more than two eyes in us, 'Becca Bateson? For I wasn't looking in the room glass, but I saw *black* pass in it as if a shadow more than mysen were in the room. Oh, Ark, son, *why* dosta keep such prophets o' things? I shrieked my heart up. There from the top of thy father's hat flew yon devil's black cinder of a bird of a magpie o' thine. *Mrs. Kershaw! Somebody's turn has come. Is Noah home? Let me down! I must seek out Noah. Let me down!*"

"Let her down!" called Ark.

"Margit, woman—"

"My Noah *is* home, then? Oh, I feel it in your hands. Your fingers tell me he's hurt. Let me down!"

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"Do you *hear?*" shouted Ark to the women.

"Just now, Margit; just now, Ark."

"Have you women turned magpies black against me, making claws of your hands and closed beaks of your mouths, as mum an' dumb as a corpse? Oh, women, women, am I to be buried dead and alive betwixt you two in this tomb o' the stairs! Lord, I can hear them coffin-walking into the house. Let me go!"

Ark violently seized Mrs. Kershaw's arm, but she did not heed. He hit her, but she did not yield, saying, "You *must* wait, Ark, lad."

"If you're a widow true to your love and loss, Ann Kershaw, let me go to my widowing man! . . . They've wakened the bab—the bab! And you be a real mother, 'Becca Bateson, and give me my arms for their right use. Hear to yon second little Meg bleating on us straight from sleep, like my first little Meg callin' to its father from its sleep in heaven. Hasta no mother's ears? *Women!*"

Ark sprang from a step upon 'Becca Bateson's back, and from that elevation hammered so fiercely at Widow Kershaw's head that the bonds slackened, and Margit flew down the stairs like a liberated sprite of grief.

At the foot of the stairs, however, Margit abruptly stood perfectly still, fronting a crowd that was sorrowfully awaiting her, and yet trying to veil from her the inevitable shock.

A man impulsively called, "Never thee mind, Margit!"

Margit's face visibly paled. It even hardened in keeping with that hour's grim fate still hidden by the shuffling group.

"I knew it," she murmured, as if some spectre of knowledge within her spoke. "I knew it," she repeated, advancing with such a pallor of resolution upon her that the group mutely opened for her to see the cloth-covered



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dwarfish form of her Noah on a short ladder supported by two chairs.

"You may as well try and cover heaven and hell with clothes," she slowly said. "I'd see through coverings, now, if they were a hundred mile thick," and Margit put both hands upon the hillock of cloth where the feet were. "It's not for a Thomas's want of faith in you, Noah, that I touch you, dear lad. You're my Noah's Noah, I know. You're here. And you're not. You're over there. You're gone. But still my lad." Her head sank upon the feet, and there she sobbed.

Mrs. Dootson tenderly touched the bent shoulders.

"Nay," said Margit, calmly, though sobbing, "you must leave me be. Only one touch in all the heaven and earth and the sea and sky would now do for me—and that would be my Noah's. . . . No, no, don't, Sarah Ann. Leave me be, lass. I'm not quarrelling with what is. I take it. I take it at its worst. I take it at its best. It's God's. It were to be. It *is*. It's not as quick-sudden to me as any on you think. But, ah, to *thee*, lad?" Margit asked the form, quite as if Noah could hear. Then she slowly felt her way along the form towards the covered face. "But now—*how*, did my Noah widow me, men?" she cried, turning to them. "And where?"

"He fell dead by Hewitson's, Margit. But he felt nought, I'm sure. I believe he were gone before he reached the ground."

"And this thruppence were in his grip," said another man, offering Margit the money.

Margit closed her eyes, tightened her lips, and shook her head. "No," she said, tersely. "My Noah was right. I oughtn't to have sent him. Burn the coins. I don't touch a dead man's toll to the devil. Burn 'em."

The man placed the now mystic coins on the table. Margit, touched still deeper with the mystery, lightly



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took hold of the cloth with the tips of her fingers and thumb. She paused before lifting it, as if all beneath were holy ground. As she paused, Mrs. Dootson's familiar hand took hold of Margit's wrist to dissuade her.

"Leave—me—be, Sarah Ann," said Margit, with unusual calm. She even let go of the covering to speak more fully. "*You* see to the bairn in your arms, Sarah Ann. You be with the living. I'm with the dead. And my own dead. Leave me be—*all* on ye—I'm not yours—I'm his—and more now nor ever. Aye, come here, Ark, son. Come and look on thy father with me. Your eyes keep watch with my eyes. What one misses the other may see. But don't expect life, dear lad; thy father's with us only as last year's shadows are."

Margit slowly peeled the covering upward. But she started and quickly turned it down again, standing with tightly closed eyes, resisting a revelation she had seen in the face. She muttered through her hard-set teeth, "No—no—*no!*" and cried aloud, "Oh, you get away, son—out—up-stairs—anywhere—away."

"If you stay, mother, I stay."

"Now, Margit, *you* come away," urged Mrs. Dootson; and others called, "Aye do," and, "Now do, little woman."

"Speak of what you know, childer-folk," she answered, again closing her eyes. "You're with the living, I tell you; I'm with the dead—and with the before and after of it; yes, and the now of it, too. Speak of what you know."

The women signalled to each other that persuasion was of no use; Margit would have her whims.

Margit, with closed eyes, put forward her hand, again lifting the covering. Even still with closed eyes she held her own face over Noah's face. Then, to take by surprise all that fate might have to reveal, she swiftly looked.

"Oh, Ark, son! Oh, Sarah Ann!" she wailed, turning



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away with her little hands flat to her little face. "It's too true. That wild mother wench has witched him for finding her bairn. She wanted it drowning and he saved it. The witch of yon wench is struck stark stiff white in his face. Down in his eyes you can see her; she's there."

"Nay, Margit! Nay, nay."

"I've seen. I *know*. Her brat must go. Go! Noah, Noah; my poor lad Noah; just to think!—to think!—she didn't let you go in your own time, or have the luck to die in your bed! Sarah Ann, yon bairn doesn't breathe in this house the lost breath of my poor man. Out her goes, head and foot, body and soul!"



CHAPTER III

INTUITIONS

NEXT day young Ark, with elbows on his knees, and his face like a boat-keel wedged between his hands, sat mystified in his grief on a three-legged stool between the cradle and the fire-place cheek.

His mother was muttering, "Just to think—to think—to think—son, of that dye-house mother-lass! the raw, red-hand on her! the cruel, crafty, witch-my-soul mischief on her! to go and curse your father for doing for a bairn what any man in ten thousand would have done. And to leave on us, on me, on you, the ill-luck of your father breathing away outside of his own house."

"Oh, never mind her, mother," mumbled Ark from between his pressing hands. "That's the worst of—of father and me telling an' reading fairy stuff to the likes of you. What other folks hear an' laugh at, you hear and cry at, till you fair think you see it. She's but a every-day lass. She's only—"

"What do *you* know, old Thirteen-last-Monday?" Margit asked, dreamily, putting the place in order as if for visitors. "*Here's* a puzzle of fear for you, my lad. Will you walk up to Boggart's Head in the livin' dead of the night—yourself—all alone—except for what walks with you, as you can't see?"

"Well—eh—if there were ought to serve, I would."

"Now you know, as well as you know the hair on your long, young head, you wouldn't set the little toe of your



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foot there. So that's enough for *you*. You're young, son. The world isn't awake to you yet, night or day, or the queer times between."

Still bending his head into his hands, little Ark replied, "It's old wives' talk, as they say."

"An' old wives have more wisdom nor young ones; and worlds more wisdom nor twenty generations of pit lads, if they were all packed into one to make up the outside show of a man."

"It belongs to far-back times does that granny gabble about witching and goblining. I've read it so."

"And the far backer it is, lad, the more likesome to be true—the nearer Creation, you ninny! Couldn't your papers and books print *that* into you?" Refixing some black-cock plumes in an old jug, she said, "I'm surprised at you, Ark. Young as you are, I thought you had more wit-what-and-why into every-day things. You'd deny yesterday's shadows next. Aye. Then you'll come to denying this day's sunshine. And then the very sun. And then the solid earth itsen! And what next? What next, I wonder!" she repeated, dusting a big brown-backed Bible, which was only read on Good-Fridays. "Next you'll be making it out as we're nought but a something of nothing. Next you'll be making God's somewhere out of the devil's nowhere. Lift your head up, and look through those father's eyes o' thine; yes, and with all his senses, and with your own eyes and senses as well, and see if yon *is* a twinkling beam of the sun or *not*; see if it's slipping slant out of nowhere—as ye'd *think*—straight into the cradle, and showing up my poor criss-cross, pitchity-patchity little quilt of years ago. *Is* it a sunbeam, now? Maybe it's a solid white rolling-pin to you? Now is it? Say!"

"Any half-eyed jackass, even with his lug over his eye, could see that much."

"Do your two man's eyes, to say nought o' jackass

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lugs, know whether it's something more nor it *seems*? Hey? Answer that for me an' the silence as is waiting for you."

"I've never thought on it. At least—"

"Do you know ought or nought about it? How an' why it's come—and gone, see?"

"N-o."

"Well, then, young guess-as-you-go, don't put yourself up for a all-the-world-know-all."

Briskly shaking a bunch of peacocks' plumes and fixing them back in a spoutless brown coffee-pot, Margit resumed: "Have you ever seen the moon in a pail of well-water?"

Ark did not reply. What was the use? He sat thinking.


Dusting a domed glass-shade over a stuffed ferret staring entranced in a lonesome elysium of its own, Margit called louder, "Have you?" She waited. Then, regarding his silence as a negative, she said: "Then I have! I saw it as lately as last night. And I'm solemn sure the water were the heavier to carry for it—as sure as I feel that this old ferret of thy grandfather's father sees rabbits sometimes."

"Gammon!"

"You may call it gammon, back gammon, black gammon, or any other kind of gimmon-gammon, if your innocent ignorance leads you into the likes. But you've not *seen* it—you've not *felt* it—and you know no more nor your sort of common knowing *can* know."

"Why, mother, the moon draws water—makes the tides—so I've read; and by that your pail of water would be lighter. Aye!" he added, with a chuckle, "the moon would be giving you and the pail a lift!"

"Aye?" said Margit, mentally revolving upon a new mystical axis. "Aye? Haply? Aye, son? Well, as I think of it, I see nought to laugh at, lad. Nought to



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titter-tatter at in the moon, water, woman, or pail. No. Supposing th' water *were* lighter? It's none the less queer. Is it? Or it's none the less something more nor mere empty water at work. Now, is it?"

He did not answer.

"An' yet over-clever folk believe they go by themselves for their water; they never reckon that the moon goes with 'em, and to give a help from Providence. At any rate, I turned o'er a change of sixpence I had, for yon moon shinin' full in the pail were a very new kind o' moon to me. Now, you needn't be rubbing the moon and stars of that cradle, son; or fingerin' an' stroking yon bairn's hair as if it were a new cat you wanted to pit-pat into a knee-pet. Yes, maybe to scrat thee some day! Who knows? That cot—must—go—up—to—where—you—brought—it—from. And it goes up empty. Tell me, Ark, now, as you'd speak at the last day of the Judge's judgment, did you really seek the bairn's mother as I asked you to?"

Ark nodded.

"And they know nothing more about her?"

Ark kept silent.

"Now they did? I can hear something in your saying nothing. What *did* they say, son?"

"Some of them said she's a Welsh Princess—"

"A what?"

"A—Welsh—Princess."

"We're all princesses o' some sort o' Providence, Welsh or un-Welsh."

"And some of the lasses expect to find her in the Blue Beck."

"Nay! I'd like her to come for her own first. But you needn't go looking *there* for the Welsh Princess, as they call her. D' you hear? We've had enough and to spare of flesh-fish of that sort from the Beck. Do you hear? Ark, do you hear?"

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"Aye, aye—what's the creature to me?"

"Not your death-blow, as she's just been to your father, I hope. A few years back they would have buried her like an unbaptized, at the north of the church or some four roads' ends. But if she has taken hersen to the water, I'd like to know what four stream ends she sinks at. To mark it, for peace sake. Aye, aye, your grandfather's father, Ark, was buried late, by lantern-light and window-candle. It was old style. Good, sensible old style. But the vicar is glum against it for my Noah. And to think—we dress in black; and we feel black; and why not bury a body in the natural black of night, when the day itsen is dead?"

Mrs. Dootson appeared at the door. Entering, she whispered, "Has it come?"

"Aye; oak and black-heart plates, Sarah Ann. Would you like to go up and see him?"

"That's what I've come for. Mrs. Kershaw will follow soon."

"I'm so glad. Noah would like it. Are you ready now, or will you wait?"

"Ready, lass."

"It must be Sunday with the dead, I think, he looks so nice, Sarah Ann. Stop you down, Ark, and if—why, that bairn's awake, see! I do believe, Sarah Ann, she knows you by nature all the way down in her sleep. If anybody comes, son, send them up; all but Mrs. Meakin-croft. If she comes, call me," Margit added, entering the staircase and ascending. "I'm not going to have her look dizzy-an'-dazed and cross-eyed crookéd at my Noah through three noggins o' whiskey. I'm not going to have it, Sarah Ann. You're breathing rather hard, woman; arta frightened, or is it mounting these twisty stairs? Would you like to stay outside here a bit?"

Mrs. Dootson shook her head.

Margit whispered, "This is his door, then," and gently



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turned the handle. "Come straight in. That's right. Hey dear, Sarah Ann, Sarah Ann, I wish he could die again, I feel so new—so born-again like—both in body and soul. I believe two deaths to the one dear life would make a living saint of me. Sithee, sithee, Sarah Ann. Here is my dear lad's face. . . . It's Mrs. Dootson, Noah. Strange, Sarah Ann, I don't think him deaf now. An' yet, Noah, lad, you're as dumb as stone to me—as dumb as a buried stone without mouth or tongue."

"What a picture, Margit! What a picture!"

"I knew you'd think so. I tell thee, dear woman, the sight o' peace an' rest on him makes me loath to live—loath and lonesome to live, it does. When I look an' look on him like this, something aback of death in his still know-all face draws me—draws me, Sarah Ann, like Ark has just told me about the lifting moon. Aye! Something big comes o'er me, Noah, when I look an' look near on you—here—and think far away on you up there; I feel like a big sea-tide lifting to some big moon. Oh, Sarah Ann—"

"Never mind, Margit, lass. Never mind. Well, you *have* made him neat and nice, Margit."

"Hey, he wanted no making, Sarah Ann."

"No? I never did see any one in death more like still-life, and so happy like."

"It's the witchy look of yon Welsh wench that has gone. Gone. And I do hope it has, over to her Wales. I put this tuft of rosemary on him for that; I minded something I'd heard about it; an' would you believe, Sarah Ann, his face smoothed out of trouble like as if it had been alive agen. It did, in truth. I speak, dear woman, as I find. And see, as my Noah was a perfect bairn for birds, I've put in a feather or two. I would have liked a wing-feather of one of his Sunday skylark favorite pets. I've been out i' th' fields looking for one. But bless you, woman, his larks are singing higher an'

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nigher to the sky nor ever to-day; so he'll be hearing them from the upper side, Sarah Ann, love him! For he's not deaf now. I'm as certain well sure o' that as if I hear for him mysen. Though", (Margit whispered very low) "what do you think? What *do* you think? First thing this morning, in the forgetting of grief, I caught mysen actually giving Noah the dumb signs! First thing this morning! It were too early in the day to be used to thinking him dead."

"I can quite believe it, Margit."

"Them's his best clothes, sithee, hanging up. Aye, Sarah Ann, aye. I put 'em out just as on Sundays. He looked so like it—and you *never* know—you never *know*. Though I quite believe he's gone, you're never full certain. And if he *should*—well, they're there to his hand. And more nor that, there's hope in the sight o' them to me, as if some day and somewhere I'll see him in 'em again."

"Well, you can think that way, dear lass. I'd like my man to see him, Margit."

"And welcome! Welcome! Noah would be proud on it. Any time up to a few minutes afore the funeral. And if you know any others as would like, I'm sure I'd be only too pleased, with the sad sort of pleasure it can't help but be. Anybody but Mrs. Meakincroft, and she'll no more wimble-wamble though the needle's eye of yon door into this room in her drink than she would wimble-wamble into heaven. That's my So-be-it an' Amen for her, Sarah Ann. For my Noah is more a true Templar now than ever."

"There's somebody below. Widow Kershaw, for one."

"Aye. And 'Becca Bateson. And Sal Thornton. Husht! They're speaking to Ark and the bairn."

"I hear Dolly Egerton."

"Oh, I'm so thankful-glad Dolly has come," said Margit. "It 'll square up old scores. You mind yon bit of a



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cock-and-hen pecking Noah and her had three years back? Well, she's never let the sun make a shadow of her in this house since. For pity's sake, Sarah Ann, go down to that bairn, they're making it cry, and for Noah's sake I can't bide hearing it. Sarah Ann!" whispered Margit. "Here. A minute. Have you heard any wrinkling of the bairn's father?—for if the mother shirks it, I seek *him*."

"You must seek a long way, Margit. They say she were wedded up some mountain over aback o' Wales. But who's to be believed? They do say she's upper-born. But I don't know."

"She came low down when she came to Merrywain's dye. Hark to her echo in yon cryin' bairn! Do get down to it, Sarah Ann, and send the women up. Noah would be glad."



CHAPTER IV

THE ORDEAL WITH MILLGATES' MEG

BEFORE dawn next day Margit was up making currant funeral cakes by candle-light; and not so much for the funeral folk as for Noah. As donors of respect to her Noah the mourners should have liberty to empty the side-table, ask for more cake and cheese, and be thrice welcome to call for yet another feast of respect on Sunday.

Her face was aglow with the heat of work, her hands were white with flour, and her eyes were dark-rimmed and dim, as if with constant mute communion in the half-pleasantly haunted shadow of death.

The sudden alighting of early morning brilliance upon the white window-blind made Margit look up.

"Thank ye, funeral dawn!" she called towards the light. "Why, you're making even my white blind into a lit-up shroud of silver glory for this day of days for my Noah. It's a fit shroud for an angel is yon. But eyes! it does dazzle. Heaven must have opened to let some of its overmuch shining out. I'll creep up and see if it's seeking my Noah."

Margit went up-stairs. She saw dazzling rays travelling silently and slowly up the coffined form. The creature stood awed, watching the beams stealthily creep even into the hollow of Noah's coiled hands—out again—up his breast—and then glide across his heart—off the bed—up the wall—and vanish.



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The room was darker by the loss of that silent visitant on silvery tiptoe. Margit peeped at her dear Noah's face. The pallor darkened as a cloud-shadow drew its moving veil in varying degrees of density between her and it. The face, she fancied, moved—saddened. Margit moaned longingly and watched. Seeing nothing special, she looked around and about, feeling peculiarly in the presence of the strange, silent company of moving shadows on the bed, floor, and wall.

In the spirit of their silent glidings Margit slightly sped out on tiptoe. At the foot of the second flight of stairs she wished to call to waken Ark. But a premonition made her sure that she would regret rousing the staircase echoes, and she softly went up.

The sun's rays were now travelling upon Ark, asleep.

"Hullo!" she muttered to the rays. "You've leaped from father to son. I take that to mean good and well."

Bending very closely to Ark, she whispered, as if even whispering were inharmoniously loud, "Ark, get thee up. Waken, son! This is the last day you'll have your father. Make it a long, long, long one, lad!"

His drowsiness, in ignorance of all else but itself, yawned.


"Lor'! lad, thy mouth needn't show me a grave and little white tombstone o' teeth first thing. Come, waken up, son. You've a lot to get into little to-day. I want you to go to Mrs. Dootson for a basin o' flour—I'm short—and another half-pound o' currants, and—"

With eyes closed he stretched his long arms and short legs in grotesque angles, the quilt modelling itself in low relief to his form.

"My senses, son, don't cut figures of yourself to the likes o' that, or I'll think Old Scrat's binding you to the bed. Come, Ark!"

"Aye, aye! All right!"

"Then I want you to go and bid old Jeems Mottram



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and Joeie Wright for this afternoon—I forgot 'em—and I know your father would have bidden 'em to *me*. Don't turn over again, son. I want you to try your hand again at feeding the bairn."

He sat bolt upright.

"Oh, that's your call-me-up, is it? I see. I must call 'bairn, bairn,' when you go to morning shift at the pit—as you'll have to go some day soon, dear lad. Dress you, Ark; I want you to put a week o' doings into a day."

"What are you after in the middle o' the night like this, mother?"

"Nay, it's what is after me—and after thee—and after all on us, when trouble is on its long legs. You've been dreaming, I can see. Haply with—father?"

He swerved sideways, his face to the wall, and his hand to his face.

"Was it really with your father, Ark?"

He sat up again. His strange gaze asked, "Is it all true? Really true?"

"That your father's gone, lad? He was still in death three minutes back. Though we earth folk never know. The sun makes life, they say, and I thought his face were quickening under it just now, but—"

"I mind. I mind! Let me up."

"But did you see him, son?"

Ark nodded, gazing at the quilt.

"Happy?"

He nodded again.

"Very happy?"

Ark did not answer.

"Tell me, there's a son as must now be a father as well; for last night I tried all my head and heart to dream of him, but couldn't—couldn't. I couldn't so much as get into the same air an' land as him. I didn't even sleep, lad."



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"He were nursing."

"Nay? Our real Meg?"

Ark shook his head.

"Not—little—Meggie?—not sister?"

He shook his head again, saying, "The bairn he found. He were dressing it in posies. You couldn't see the bairn for buttercups an' daisies—"

"It was dead, then?"

"Nay, nay. The child were laughing—and father too; him more nor th' bairn."

"God save us!—hey, I'd have liked to have heard him! And what were you doing, son?"

"Nought but seeing. Yea, I did. Father sent me climbing up Boggart's Head for some more daisies he said he could see."

"Bless him. Just like father! He were always for posies and birdies."

"And when I put my hand out they jumped into butterflies and flew."

"Butterflies—and flew? Now, what's the meaning o' that? Butterflies—and flew?—and flew?"

"The daisies were red and white, and as real as—"

"Say yon last again, Ark."

"They were red and white—"

"Scarlet red?"

"Red, and as real as my nail here, till I put out my hand—then they up with theirsens and went, and me hunting 'em, hunting and hunting 'em."

"Aye, son? Well?"

"Then I heard—thee; an' here I am!"

"But I do wish, Ark, when you were asleep just now, that you could have nudged this thought into me with a wink o' but one lash! I'd have left you wi' father and him wi' you as long as sleep itsen would have done. And he were laughing? Ah me, son, for one moment's hearing of his laughter now, I'd fair sell all the rest o'

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my hearing to Owd Nick, if I may dare say so. And playing with yon bairn? Well, you've wakened with a riddle, Ark. And him getting you to hunt for flowers for her? But you see they wouldn't be caught for her. A queer, queer touch is yon. The flowers wouldn't be caught for her. I'm a poor reader o' dreams; but if he were happy with her, let him be so, I say; let him be so. I wonder if Daddy Hawksworth could make ought clear on it?"

"Aye, for a 'silly un's sixpence,' as they say."

"Not so silly, if it would pacify me to yon bairn. But I must run; I smell burning. That's right, Ark, up with you," she said, descending the staircase. Half-way down she stopped to call up in a reverent whisper:

"Of course you're remembering, son? Put on your blacks. I've picked you out your best collar, you'll see. And think on, lad, don't—draw—the blind."

Ark swerved upon the bed, wildly thrusting his face into the clothes. Never, never, never to hear and see him in life again!

"Oh, father, father!" he murmured within. "No wonder mother is anxious; no wonder she looks scared—half crazed—and me drowsing here like a heartless stone flint."

He sprang to his feet, the flashes of resolution in his black eyes looking as if sorrow had struck two stationary sparks out of the flint's very heart. He briskly dressed.

He went down to the kitchen and looked into the cradle. The child was awake, with a tranquil, large-eyed innocence.

Margit said, "Thank mercy she's been good; no more knowing or caring what's going on wi' me nor a flower knows or cares for a shot bird, if it *is* so. Here's your breakfast, son. Get it o'er. The morning will fly like a feather i' th' wind. We'll wonder where and how it's flit



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to. Two o'clock the hand-bier's coming from the church. But it's two o'clock, lad, to me all the time. Your father's been in his grave and out a hundred hundred times to me. And still it's to do! Aye, and this bairn's to be done with too, unless there comes a clear, clear sign; as clear as even the blind wind could read."

"In what way? How d'you mean? Don't be thinking."

"Now, be a get-thee-on-quick kind o' son, Ark. I'm waiting for flour now, and currants, too; and I want you to go and bid old Jeems Mottram and Joeie Wright."

"But what's that about this bairn?"

"It's what's right to me, an' right to thee, an' right to it; aye, and right to your father. She must travel, son, unless there comes a sign."

"Why? I could nurse her!"

"You're young, Ark. You're a no-more-nor-the-nursing sort of innocent yet. It's a pit pick you'll have to nurse after this, I'm sore grieved to think, lad. It means hard work for the both on us; an' bone hard, too. Aye! I must see the over-looker at Dale-o'-Brink pit first thing to-morrow—for you an' mysen, but foremost for mysen."

"But you'll not, mother!"

"It's pit-brow for me or the workhouse—one or t'other. If only thinking would make a lady of me, I'd now be a riding-in-my-carriage-and-pair sort o' duchess; for I've thought enough about mysen an' thee for a four-horse coach to drag; but the only place thought will drive me to is—the pit-brow, the pit-brow, lad. I'll truck coal with any on 'em yet! An' I'm sure you'll make a good drawer; you're just the long-in-the-arm-and-short-in-the-body kind of build."

Ark sat eating, but deep in a dark mood. Before he had finished breakfast he rose.

"That's right, Ark—on with your hat! Here's the



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basin; and dunna forget to borrow half a pound o' Sarah Ann's butter until Ashton's shop's open; and if she has such a thing as a nick o' nutmeg, beg the loan of it, too; little as it is, it 'll take a load off my mind for later on, when I come to make the spiced lemon drink. But do be quick back, for I see this bairn has the crookéd look o' going to cry."

As soon as Ark went, Margit crossed the kitchen to a jug of cut marigolds on the window-ledge, muttering, with her face in the direction of the open-eyed bairn, "If my Noah would give thee a flower, I don't mind to," and, with a kindness that was nevertheless impatient, she from a distance jerked a marigold towards the child's hand. It alighted on the round, placid face. Under the cold, sprinkling shock, the face suddenly contorted. A grimace, prophetic of the profoundest grief, lingered a moment. The whole grimace, with deliberate purpose, took in a great breath. Once fully in, the whole body, arms, legs, and head, strained it forth again in a scream too large for an easy escape.

Margit stared as if her kindness had unwittingly touched some magic spring that had turned a sacred portion of silent creation into screaming chaos. She moved to the cradle.

In the strenuous giving forth of the first great yell sound seemed to have hurt itself, and to be now yelling even louder on its own pathetic behalf.

Margit impatiently went down on her knees at the cradle.

"Why, you're squarting as if I meant it! How did I know it would carry so far? And it wasn't that wet. Never mind them. I didn't mean it. Now come. Sithee, sithee, sithee, bairn. Oh, hold thy noise wi' thee, reytching and reytching till tha 'rt fair blue i' th' face; and all for what wouldn't have flared a common-sense fly. Tut! Stop! Tha 'rt vexing *thasen* now. I'm not hurting thee.



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Now, now, now. Come, come ; sithee, sithee, little wench. Oh, drat thee, dree little demon of a brat ! Tut ! I've no more Job's patience to lose on thee, squaring and tearing thy mouth wi' a squart straight at me like that ! Shame on thee !" cried Margit, rising to the sugar on the table. She hastily spooned a few crystals into the child's mouth just as a sobbing breath was drawn in. The crystals clogged the top of the throat. The whole child gasped—coughing—convulsively struggling for breath—apparently for life.

"Hey, but you have more nor your all-your-own passion in your mite of a body. There's a lot of the devil's own as well. Vixen ! Come up here !" she called, lifting the coughing baby, and violently patting it on the back. Adding a shake, Margit said :

"Ugh ! sit up—and take time. You may well bark, with a dog-in-the-manger temper like this. You've a look as if you'd bite if you only had teeth. Husht ! Have done with it ! Now don't begin again. I've heard tell on 'em burying a cock at a four lanes' ends to make bad spirits lie quiet, but it would take Peter's cock, and a roost o' hens, and broods of all kinds o' Christian chickens to lay thee quiet. What's the use o' giving you sugar ? Why, you're too sour to let your taste get *to* it. That's right now, have done, have done. Be a good bairn for to-day. Hullo ! Squarting square at me again ! Hey, but it's a sad pity thy mad mother didn't hear thee like this a good few months afore you breathed on this blessed earth ; haply she'd have thought twice on it ; and I wouldn't be god-mothering thee by force, like to this."

Quite suddenly the child stopped. It reflectively worked its tongue and lips.

"Ah ! You taste the sugar, do you ? Ho, ho ! Time for you. Fancy, to flare up on me like oil afire. But I really didn't mean to vex you, little woman. No, no, I



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were on'y givin' you a sprig the same as *he* did in my Ark's dream. Lie down again ; my hands must be full o' something else."

And yet Margit paused, musing, as she stooped towards the cradle. With the child still in her arms, she looked at the staircase, she listened, as if to her own vivid fancies within and without. Her eyes shone strained. Her face flushed fiercely like a fanned little furnace of the soul. She stood like some dwarfed oracle face to face with Fate, inspired to think strange thoughts.

"I'll *try*!" she muttered, exultantly. "Aye! It can only be a poor seeking mortal woman's mistake, if it *is* a mistake—if it is. But I'll try! We folk of earth never know till we try. Either the living or the dead *may* give me a sign. And that's all I want ; all I want!" she murmured with self-pity, as, carrying the child, she stealthily went on tiptoe to the front door and slid the wood bolt into its slot.

"All I want is a *sign*—a sign for, or a sign against, the bairn ; for or against," she muttered, entering the staircase. "If my Noah can play with thee in death, little 'un, after this I'll play with thee in life—if it's right, if it's right ; but I must know the right an' wrong of it first," and the trouble-dazed, hopeful creature went on tiptoe into her dead Noah's room as into a temple where the silence might speak or the shadows indicate a way.

With a devout, superstitious hope of seeing phenomenal hints from the two realms of mystery covered from her by her dead Noah on the bed and that living child in her arms, Margit held the face of the living over the face of the dead, and, feeling as if between life and death herself, she breathlessly watched now the face of Noah and now the face of the child.

But all was still.



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Most earnestly she yet again scrutinized Noah's passive face for occult inscriptions that might possibly be flickeringly shadowed there.

"No!" she murmured, disappointed, depressed; more puzzled than before.

Again she looked at the indifferent face of the child as if into the face of its future, alert for the least unusual quiver of lip or eye.

"N-o," she murmured, more deeply mystified. "Seemi'ly young life knows nothing about death. Seemi'ly young death knows nothing about life—only in dreaming. Seemi'ly; *seem'ily*. And yet, dear lad, I half believe there's a glimmer of a change of look in thee. What it reads is beyond me—more's the pity! And now you seem to look straight through at me, lad, but without eyes. *I wonder!* I do wonder, if—hey, Margit Millgate! but I've a mind to make you connily lift up the lap of his eye. If he were in life, you'd think nought of it. Just to see. Maybe there'd be a sign inside there? And maybe not. Not. No. It's of no use. Rest lad, rest. I won't trouble thee more. Come you down to the cot again more-nor-ever strange missie," said Margit, descending. "I was mistaken, as far as I can tell. The feeling was wrong—but one never knows for sure. Come you down bab from my Noah's heaven to my own earth again, and let me get on. Hullo! there's Ark, drumming like a somebody-come-to-life-again thumping on a coffin-lid. Aye, aye, one never knows; one hears o' such things. But I suppose I must finish food-making. Whether for Noah living or Noah dead, there'd be a feast."

At two o'clock that afternoon the circular kitchen was crowded with mourners to the front door-steps.

The long, black bier was carried from the church-yard over the way into their midst, and the mourners stood



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around it as around the empty fabric of a low altar soon to be dedicated to the awful god of death.

On a long side-table across the circular wall was the funeral feast, covered, communion-like, with a white cloth, as if it also in the meantime had to be in keeping with the dead.

Margit's worn face was drawn and pallid, but with a seething heat of inner excitement burning its way out across her wrinkled brow like a red bar of sunset. At times her forehead seemed to weep instead of her eyes.

Thus, with Mrs. Dootson at her side, dwarfish Margit, in dense new crape, stood between the fireplace and the bier. All were waiting to hear the expected movements of six men who had gone up-stairs. But sound itself seemed dead. Even a house-spider, which silently descended on its lengthening Jacob's ladder from the white ceiling, halted over the bier and waited, waving in the breeze and sunbeams as if it were a silver-chained censurer of some worshipping elves of the air.

Young Ark, breathless with a sacred respect, was about to step from his mother's side to wisp the insect from hovering where his father would shortly be placed; but a twinge of grief dulled his impulse. He could not heed anything outside of himself.

At the sound of lifting and shuffling overhead, Mrs. Dootson almost secretly fitted her great arm along Margit's shoulders, and then pressed her to her great form, soothingly patting her. Margit, in turn, drew Ark to her, and restlessly toyed with his ear. He, with hands tightly clasped, gazed down—and yet down—far down!—as if, through the old millstone, to some regions where his young life was being scourged as if separated from him. Great round tears dripped straight from his immovable dark eyes to the floor, like pangs voluntarily falling headlong to self-destruction, to be splashed out of contact with all human emotion.

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Quite suddenly, it seemed to Ark, the short, broad coffin was on the long bier, the bearers standing for a rest. He heard his mother moan, as if praying by means of inarticulate grief; and she thrust her face against Mrs. Dootson's form, like a woman that had become a helpless child.

The bearers whispered, moved, and lifted the bier.

"Stop—wait," cried Margit. "I must really do it, after all!" she muttered to herself, breaking away from Mrs. Dootson. "I must!" Pushing through a group, she snatched up the sleeping child from the cradle, and thrust it on the coffin, saying, "My Noah carried her in, and it's my Noah as must carry her out!"

Murmurs of protest surrounded her. The women interfered. Even Ark protested. A man put hands upon the child to lift it.

"Hands away! She goes!" cried Margit, her own hands more firmly holding down the child.

The child awoke and cried.

"No, no," some called.

"Poor bairn!" said others.

"Oh, Margit Millgate," appealed Mrs. Dootson.

"She shall go as her came; as her came! I must have peace. I must have luck. She's always crying at me—she'll cry worse and worse now. Leave me alone, Sarah Ann! You know nought o' my promptings. His hands brought her; his arms must carry her away."

Margit suddenly shuddered, shrinking from her task, calling, "God, Lord, what's happening me!" and swiftly swept her fingers across her cheeks and brow and about her neck, as if something invisible were touching and tugging her.

"Sithee, sithee!" She pointed to the spider wildly running across the baby's puckered face, "I'm done!—I'm wrong!—I daren't!"

"I should think not," said Mrs. Dootson.



THE ORDEAL WITH MILLGATES' MEG

“For my soul's sake, Sarah Ann, take the bairn off and lay her i' the cot—lay her in my Meggie's cot! I must see; I must see, later. Bear my poor Noah alone; bear him alone, men.” And the men slowly trudged out with the bier, and crossed the street to a red sandstone grave within sight and aglow in the sunbeams like a pit of flameless fire.



CHAPTER V

A DOUBLE VISIT

ROLLIE RONDLE was a well-rounded, plump lad of twelve, with a round head of fair curly hair; round blue eyes with the flash of good humor in them; round, red, plump cheeks suggestive of laughter even in repose, and lips with a lurking roguery in their smiles. It was always difficult, indeed, to tell whether Rollie had ruddy lips with a smile, or a ruddy smile with lips.

In the same way, it was doubtful whether he lived with his grandmother, who was ninety-nine, and spent most of her time in a great wicker chair, like a watchman's hut, or whether the old grandmother lived with him; for he was her sole companion, her waiter, messenger, and maid, and spent much of his time on a three-legged stool just outside of the great wicker chair. He sometimes fell asleep within his plumpness there. Sometimes at the same drowsy hour his poor old Nain (the Welsh for grandmother) fell asleep within her leanness, and the world would wag on without them.

One spring afternoon Rollie awoke and found his Nain's face drawn, her eyes fixed, and her hands cold. He could not awaken her. It was a stiff, chilly sleep of a kind he had never seen before. He breathed heavily, and ran in next door.

In a few minutes the kitchen was full of neighbors. "Your dear old Nain is dead," he heard them say. "Dead!" "dead!" "dead!" they repeated, with moans and

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tears. They clutched him, adding, "What will you do now, Rollie? You will never have another Nain! Never, never, boy. She has gone. Nain has left you!"

Scared out of his wits by the sight of his Nain as they lifted her upon the bed, and boyishly ashamed of the hugs and kisses of sympathy more violently repeated, he ran from the house and sought peace in a well-known empty cellar.


But the familiar place soon became too quiet, too still. It also appeared dead. He breathlessly ran to the Old Mill House, for the secret consolation of the mere presence of Ark, Meg, and mysterious Margit. But Ark and Meg, alas, were out. Fortunately queer, dwarfish Margit, standing upon a box and leaning over a pan-mug, was too busy baking to do anything but take his presence in the kitchen for granted, as she had often done before; so Rollie was glad to lie down on the warm patchwork hearth-rug and coil his arm around the smaller coil of the cat, but carefully shading his face and smarting eyes from Margit's changing points of view.

After a long, tranquil pause, Margit asked, as she was finishing her kneading, "How's Nain to-day?"

Rollie pretended not to hear. Again she asked. He still pretended not to hear, and very slyly stroked his wet eyes dry along the cat's back.

At that instant there was a knock at the door. He trembled. As Margit went to answer it he rose, and, with a light one, two, three, stepped into the dark, boarded-up staircase opposite the fire, and felt his whole being vibrating like a drum.

"Well!" exclaimed Margit to her old friend Mrs. Dootson, who had hastened to the Old Mill House after an absence of seven years. "Well, well, well! I'm right heart-and-eye glad to see you coming by surprise to give a look of old-time comfort to our round kitchen again. Sit thee down. Nay, first take off your bonnet and shawl, Sarah



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Ann. You see I've soon Sarah Ann'd mysen into the old way again. Take 'em off! No? Why not? But what a cozy-wozy-woolly-looking gray shawl it is! Welsh?"

Mrs. Dootson nodded, saying, "I'll not take off this time, Margit. But I couldn't keep runnin' up."

"Your limbs, body, head, and all must have changed, if you could!"

"Only I'm expecting the furniture, my man, and the rest on 'em."

"An' how many rest on 'em is there now, Sarah Ann?"

"Only the nine, Margit."

"It were eight."

"Oh, aye; after a queer gap o' six year I've one in arms again."

Margit sighed, and then called with almost petulant hospitality, "Sit thee down, at any rate!" as she wiped her dry, floured hands one upon the other, clapped them like two puff-balls, and twisted two chairs opposite the fire and near the fender. "I've just done doughing, an' as time is time with you, I won't waste it on washin' these hands; an' they look cleaner as they are. Come, now, let us stove our toes into old times, if only for a few minutes," she said, completely forgetful of Rollie Rondle, who was sitting still and silent in the staircase with his head bent, his face in his hands, and his curly hair dangling down. He was partly listening to the women, but chiefly living in secret with the inconvenient and heavy mystery of death. He now wished he had remained at home.

"An' it's seven years since you went to—let's see, where in Wales-of-long-names was it?"

"Rhos, Margit."

"Rhos? They must have English'd it short. At any rate, it's like seventeen sevens to me, dear woman, I've lived so much since then. Angels in heaven, Sarah Ann,

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talk of horse-shoes and crookéd pins. I *have* worn away a kickin' an' a prickin' piece of time out of eternity since you left, soon after my Noah's strange going."

"Indeed, Margit?"

"Dying out of his bed, as you mind. I never, never again want to put so many palpitations into nights an' days. Never in this world again, or the next, or the one after that! I sometimes thought my poor heart were sorry for itsen, an' were coming through to be worn out, outside o' me like a mill lass's Sunday locket. However, we're here—we're breathin'—we're in the flesh. At times, woman, we were in the bone."

"Nay, nay, Margit. I'm sorry. We've had stiff scrat-tin' times oursens, but—"

"What I've said, Sarah Ann, is the truth of life; it's nearly been the double truth o' life an' death with me. But thanks to one kind o' Providence an' another—an' Ark's been a big piece of heavenly providence on earth to me—thanks well-nigh-all to the providence of a good heart, a good head, and a good health in Ark, I'm no longer shaking my thin life out with the small coal through a sieve at the pit-brow. Three queer, creaky years I had on it. Three! An' what with overtime, overdoing, and overseeing, I put in thirteen months to each year, love thee. Thirteen to each year. But now, thanks to hissen, too, Ark's no longer drawin' the four long limbs out of his short body down in Brink-o'-th'-Dale pit; thanks *all* to hissen, he's now clockin' an'—"

"So my lasses were tellin' me. I'm glad you've—"

"Sarah Ann!" called Margit, with tremulous elocution from her rising tidal depths of tearful memories. "The lad's worked for it; worked, he has—early mornin', noon, forenoon, afternoon, all the noons o' the day; he's worked night, midnight, all night, yes, even a-Sundays if the rare feelin' o' findin' out something took him. An' for why? All to teach hissen the wig-wag of a



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pendulum, the strike of a bell, or the new way of a wheel. An' now, bless thee, dear woman, for most days o' the week it's just as though a second father is working at the old window bench ; only—an' I may say it to one as is sure to understand that I mean nought against my poor gone Noah, who was witched to die out of his bed, but something more to the good o' that same Noah's son—well, it's simple, honest Time's truth to say that son Ark is to all on us just as if the sugar o' th' father had been made into sweets. He's extra. Double extra, Sarah Ann !”

The mere tremulous tearfulness of Margit's voice, combined with her lifting the corner of her shoulder shawl to her eyes, touched young Rollie Rondle's primed feelings. It seemed as if his good old Nain had died but two fresh moments ago, and he gave himself up to one more resistless flow of tears.

“Extra ! Everybody says so, Sarah Ann.”

“I always said he would be, Margit. And—the—little—lass? I've heard she's still with you.”

“And like to be till the Amen of things, if what my Noah used to call the ‘Handel's Hallelujah Chorus Amen of things’ happens in our mortal time. Yes, she's like to be. An' the longer the better for us, I've come through it all to think.”

“Now that's good for my ears to hear, knowin' what I did for her, an' seein' as you didn't take to her at first, Margit.”

“Hey, saints an' sinners ! don't talk of taking *to*, when you couldn't take *from*, now.”

In lower tones, and with a glance at the closed front door, Margit resumed, “I've only one twitch-twitch in a corner of my head with her, an' as you always had a willin' ear for favorin' me, and an unwillin' tongue against me, I'll tell it ; but in life's name—mum ! To any one outside of our own old cozy friendiness—mum,

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if you please, Sarah Ann. An' not a blink or a wink of a word to Ark. Aye, I've only one queer little twitch-twitch, an' it's this—the lass promises to be o'ercomely for the Old Mill House an' the two plain folk inside it, for plain uncurran' jannock we are in more ways nor one, even the Creator of everything with limb and body kept together with life would have to own to that. Some fine summer day she'll come to know her face—that is, as we know it. More than we know it, for it promises to go on as it's begun. Then, dear woman, she'll come to know ours. Then will be the then, Sarah Ann! Then will be the un-mum time to tremble at the ways of a creature with a face as always calls to my mind those full-eyed, full-haired, foreign half-lady lasses the Jew pedlers sell."

Mrs. Dootson blinked, as if the vision of such a creature had passed within.

"But serious, Mrs. Dootson. I'd just like you to notice Meg's eyes, an' tell me what you think. They make *me* feel as if you'd know—well, just as you'd know a woman-Jew, Sarah Ann."

"The family likeness strong?" responded Mrs. Dootson with insight. "It's a family likeness as much as it's her own? I know the sort."

"As if the eyes had been in hundreds o' peoples' heads before an' polished up with constant use. Lors a-me, Sarah Ann, they sometimes make me feel as if all her gran'mothers are lookin' at me, they're so queerishly dark and old-wise like."

While Margit continued with an eager flow of further detail, Rollie was wiping his eyes with his knuckles, and then wiping his knuckles on his jacket. He heard Margit's voice, and looked into the familiar kitchen as if he had wakened from a long benumbing slumber of grief. He was weary of fretting. But though he had a vague aching interest in life again, he felt as if all his frolic-

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some boyishness had passed from him forever into the dead body of his good old Nain, and he dimly listened to Margit saying :

“Aye, Sarah Ann, then will be the time to watch the whimsies of my young woman comin’ to her wits an’ ways. But I think most of all this for Ark. He’ll be so much the father of her by then ; an’ me like the grinny-granny, bless thee.”

“An’ she’s taken to Ark?” remarked Mrs. Dootson, with the gentlest implication that it was notable that she should.

“I know what you mean, Sarah Ann. But she’d be a queer miracle of a child if she didn’t think just as she does of him. Ark’s a wonder to her. An’ a greater wonder would be if he wasn’t. Well, Sarah, you see the wigwam sheets o’ toys she has. If he’d only put as much doing into somethin’ machiney for the pit he’d do his own pocket an’ mine some good ; but no, all his brain goes to the bairn. Then he catches her fish, an’ birds, an’ frogs, an’ even cocks an’ hens, just to let her touch e’m. Meg an’ Ark? Ark and Meg? Say sun an’ moon, an’ you have them day an’ night in a word. Though it’s strange, Sarah Ann. Strange! The lad sometimes speaks of us losing her—gettin’ me ready like. For one night he says to me after he had seen her to her bed (hey, woman, it’s a fair holiday favor for her to want *me* to see her safe up-stairs), he says to me, ‘Well, if her people ever do come to lay claim to her, mother, her table prattle, her few odds an’ ends o’ rhymes (would you believe it?—some of ’em Ark’s very, very own-most own), and her liking for walks an’ talks across fields will prove that the creature has been among well-meaning homesome folk.’ He’s going to make her the Queen o’ the May this coming month. You’re just in time for it.”

“Don’t o’erspoil her, Margit.”

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"Sarah Ann! List to me. You're a couple o' year late with that. Some jealous-sighted Brink folk reckon as we do spoil her. We don't! I'm well sure I don't. An' Ark doesn't! An' there's nobody else in the house for it, unless it's our ghosts or hersen, and there's not much sign o' that, considerin', considerin'; for, after all, she's only a well-gone seven. An' what's a seven! Only a bairn, when all's said an' done, big an' bonny though she is. I only like to see her in neatsome colorish clothes, Sarah Ann, that's all; an' in shoes instead o' clogs; leather instead o' wood. An' as the rosesome darksome lass does credit to colors, I like colors to do a bit of credit to her, an' to me too! Why not? Hey? I find those sore-tongued folk who hint about this an' blink about that, either have no bairns of their own, or no begged, borrowed, or stolen ones of somebody else's, or else what thin bits o' natural laths they have, will no more stand lookin' at after seein' Meg than a Punch-and-Judy mask will bear lookin' at when it's jerked off a younger an' bonnier face than its own. But that has no sly meanin' about any of your nine, Sarah Ann. No, no. Your word, like your childer, has sense behind it, I know; an' always had. But some folk's half-chicken childer make you wish ev'rybody could be born old. Your Jane's not single, of course?"

"Her is."

"Her's twenty by this—"

"Nay, nay, Margit. Jane's only nineteen — two months from twenty yet."

"Same as Ark. And Sarah?"


"Twelve."

"Bonny, I'll be bound."

"Aye; fair, fair."

"And what d'you think's the latest with Meg, Mrs. Dootson?" asked Margit.

"Nothin's early or late wi' childer. They're at it at



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all times. All time's their time. Well? I won't guess. Guessin' is nowhere near the doings of a growin' bairn."

"The daring lass taking off her shoe and stocking at school, to show her colored foot for bits of apple, cake, sweets, an' slate pencils! An' not for hersen; her'd bring 'em home to Ark, us not guessin' how her earned them, love thee!"

"Well!" exclaimed Mrs. Dootson. "I've nine; but that *is* somethin' new."

"I told the little witch of a wench that I'd cut her foot off if she did it again. 'I wish you would,' says she. 'Why?' says I; an' says she, "'Twould be easier to carry an' show.' Now then! An' what in the world was it that Meg said when she heard the church organ over the way? I forget. Oh, aye! 'Is music only nice noise, or is it somethin' else?' she asked Ark one Sunday. 'In what way somethin' else?' said he, just to hear her play her own music a bit. 'Well, it sounds like somethin' speakin' to nothin'.' Would you think!" exclaimed Margit to Mrs. Dootson, who was not laughing as much as Margit expected, and then tried to help her by a hearty artificial laugh of her own. "Then she had her Fairy craze. She was Beauty this, an' Humpty Dumpty that; Mrs. Cind'rella one day, an' Mrs. Jack the Giant Killer the next; Red Ridin' Hood one minute, an' the Wolf th' next. Aye! She made me be the Wolf one day, an' Ark the Dwarf. The Dwarf, mind you!"

"She didn't mean anything," said Mrs. Dootson.

"Her did, though! It were a quick puttin'-to of hers as I didn't like. An' now as the mouth o' the bag's open'd, it's no use tryin' to keep in the cat. Her said with a bit o' gritty, gravelly wisdom as grated even on my back wisdom-teeth, Sarah Ann—her said quite clear that Ark would make a real live Dwarf for her, because he was just like the pictur in her book. Lors, Sarah



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Ann, I felt like washin' out 'Thou shalt not kill' with the child's own blood?"

"Margit! Margit!"

"But her hit two of us with that, Sarah Ann; an' though Ark were son enough to bear it for hissen an me, I were too much the mother to bear it for mysen an' him. If Ark were here he'd say, 'But that's long, long ago, mother.' An' I'd say to him, 'Aye, to you; to you Eve might have said it to Adam; or some monkey of a Meg might have said it to Noah in the Ark.' He tries not to remember these things; I remember 'em without tryin'. It's stuck into me with a pin, an' at times the pin pricks. But, God love us, her is on'y a child! On'y a child, after all, Sarah Ann. Ark's right. What *is* th' use o' bein' like a recordin' angel agen a mere girly girl?" and Margit tapered off her anger with a titter. "Aye, she says an' does before you can say 'Amen,' much less 'Awoman.' Girls are worse nor lads—years worse—ages worse!" And, as if with some internal knowledge of this, Margit increased her titter. "They think things afore lads can get their brains into thinkin' order. Girls are lightnin'; lads are thunder rumblin' later on!" Margit, tittering still more, linked her fingers and twiddled her thumbs like a pair of little fan-wheels.

Whenever the titter and the twiddling were combined, Margit was tickled by her pet item about Meg. As it was evidently a playful affair, Mrs. Dootson yielded to the extent of a smile, but resisted passing more to the credit of little Meg's account until she knew what she was paying for. Smiling in a speculative way, she waited for Margit to settle into narrative.

Margit, however, leaned back with her head up to give a screech of such purely private delight that Mrs. Dootson's smile vanished. She became critical, looking on. Margit with both fists thumped both knees and leaned



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forward with another scream, and her left hand pressed hard to her side as if to fill a rent.

Mrs. Dootson, by way of reasonableness, said: "Now, Margit, what is it? Tell it."

"Nay," she answered, as the back of each hand simultaneously pressed out of each eye the oozings of her delight. "Nay, nay, Sarah Ann. I've o'ertittered it, o'erdone it; it's all gone in the laugh. You'll think nothin' of it, after all this. I'll tell it to-morrow."

"Nay, nay," protested Sarah Ann, "I've begun my laugh, let me finish it. I don't care for a laugh carried for'ard to next day."

"Well, one mortal afternoon I caught her up in my room—what d'you think doin', dear woman?"

"I always give it up with bairns, Margit."

"Tryin' to saw her nose off with one of my gray hairs!"

"Save us, Margit?"

"It's true, if I may never swallow breath again. An' she owned to it!" said Margit, again tittering a little. "*That* was the crownin' cap. Owned to it! 'A nose,' she said, 'was a deal o' trouble; it was always getting cold; she was always fallin' on it; it was always in the way, an' she could wash much easier without it.' 'But how would you smell the flowers?' said I. 'I'd eat 'em!' said she. So where are old wits in face o' young ones?"

"Where, indeed?" muttered Mrs. Dootson, wrapping herself in her shawl as a sign of going.

Dreamy Rollie raised his head. The firelight fell upon his ruddy face as upon a low autumn moon. His tears had ebbed, leaving his eyes like reddened shores. He was right glad he could look into the kitchen again without risk of breaking down. But he was restive. He longed for his body and limbs to take up some of the dull weariness of his aching mind. If he disturbed Margit she would be cross. That, just then, he could not bear.



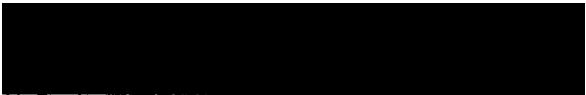
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A blow or a push would be enjoyable, but a cross word would bring back those bothering sobs. Then he should have to speak about his Nain, and Margit was always so talkative and queer. He would wait for Ark.

He waited some time. Too long, he thought ; and the two women were still talking. He was obliged to do something with his stagnant strength, and resorted to the catching of afternoon flies on the staircase frame. In due course he varied this sport by imprisoning them between his hollow palms and analytically listening to the musical gradations of their buzzings of painful inquiry and doubt. Little by little he sounded all the gamuts of buzzings in solo, duet, trio, quartette, and a final chorus of six. He wished for variations of the themes. He wondered if he could hear a fly buzz in the musical box of his mouth. He cast his best soloist inside. He felt rather than heard the fly crossing his tongue, beating with muffled wings some dead march of flydom. The slow march tickled him in more ways than one.

This new sensation, indeed, was delightful. He mentally invited his little benefactor to do as much for him again. But the fly was no thought-reader, even though it stood on the very sounding-board of thought. Quite on its own account it began an anxious voyage of discovery up the lad's left cheek. This sensation was even better. It was exquisite. The relief to Rollie's emotions was superb. It was such a grateful occupation for his recovering mind that he allowed it to crawl over an upper double-tooth, up the inside of his gum, and up the groined roof of his mouth. This produced the most ecstatic refinement of tickling. It was excruciating. He held on to his knees and endured the torture of rapture while the fly peregrinated east and west, north and south, and in miniature rings of elfish enchantment.

Too soon for him it stopped its parade and stood in the centre of the arch. It was apparently motionless,



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but, by his past knowledge of flies, Rollie knew, as surely as if he saw it, that the performer was standing well on its fore-legs and wiping its wings with the hind ones. This novelty entertained Rollie with one of those trivial and unintended humorous condolences of life which make the serious condolences of friends too like the sorrow they would soothe.

Quite incidentally, as it were, the fly descended from the roof to the tongue again. But there had evidently been foresight in the move, for the creature suddenly mounted the stile of Rollie's tonsil and discovered a back way out. Rollie's smothered croak was a full length of the fly too late.

"What," exclaimed Margit, taking a long breath—"what from the wide wild world has come all the way here to choke? Rollie Rondle!" she called, looking into the staircase. "Hey, but I'll shake thy full clothes for thee!"

As she was speaking Rollie felt the fly slowly but successfully creeping down his tube, and, to save himself from a sudden death of quickly imagined horrors, even as Margit stared at him, he slyly forced down all his moisture at command and prayerfully awaited results, Margit fortunately resuming the talk with Sarah Ann.

The results were conflicting. The fly seemed more drowned than alive, and yet more alive than drowned, and as if clutching at tickling straws; but so that there should be no further doubt about his own chances of life, Rollie gulped down all his available hydraulic power. In the one and the same act the fly was both drowned and buried. By association he thought of his dead Nain. The thought of her was less exacting, less severe, not quite so near the feelings; for death in one form mollifies death in another, even the death of a fly being the silent moralizing of Nature on the death of mankind.

This success made Rollie's mind active. The activity



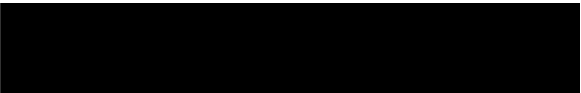
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passed down to his frame. He quietly unclasped his clogs and took them off. With his reddened eyes gazing on the back of Margit's head, he cautiously moved to the nearest chair on his left. His idea was to slowly work his passage to the nearest front window, mount the little table there, and gaze out.

In the meantime, with his hands under his thighs, he dangled his blue stockings and watched Margit's head like watching a dial. Fancy began to play. He forgot the window. Feelings once more took possession. Much too easily he thought of home again, and without a change in his expression two tears rolled over his eyelids and down his cheeks, his legs dangling quicker, keeping time to the greater rapidity of his thoughts. Poor Nain! How strange she looked when they lifted her.

His legs slowed down again, his face became a little paler, and, taking the ends of a white-spotted blue neckerchief out of his vest-front, he pressed his eyes. Redder than before, his eyes fixed upon Margit's head again. Keeping his gaze steady, he moved to the next chair, and once more consolingly dangled his blue stockings.

He changed his plan. He would cross the floor on tip-toe, mount Ark's bench-stool at the window on the other side of the door, and play with the tools—whether he was heard or not. He should have to do something! He had a right to do something. With a slightly heedless spring from his hands he silently launched himself upon his toes. This act took his thoughts to leap-frog and standing on his hands in the school playground. Looking back, he surveyed the house wall to see if it were a good substitute for the school wall. No. The chairs were in the way. What a pity! In a moment his eye was measuring the distance between him and the front door. It was too tempting; on the next instant he kicked off from the floor and was standing on his hands with his toes against the door.



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Margit whispered "Husht!" to Mrs. Dootson. Both listened without moving, perfect stillness heightening their expectation. "No. I thought I heard Meg's fist drumming the door."

Rollie, delightfully absorbed, silently kicked off from the door and stood on his feet again, his face as ruddy as a lantern. That had been first-rate. He would try a greater bend. Again he kicked off. The bend was too great. He looked like an arched buttress about to give way. He tried to get back, but couldn't.

"Now I can hear her," said Margit, still without moving. "List!"

Rollie desperately kicked off from the door, and by the merest shade of success balanced himself on his arms. He was so delighted that he began to walk on his hands with a gruesome skin-scraping sound on the floor.

"God in heaven! what's comin' out o' the earth?" exclaimed Margit, seizing Mrs. Dootson's arm and looking round. "Hey, but, Rollie Rondle, you don't know how near the old devil in me were striking at the young devil in you with this here poker!" and Margit, somewhat after date, took the poker up. "No wonder your face looks roasted and your eyes part boiled, forcing the blood into the neck and stopper of the bottle like that! And what are you slink-slyin' about in your stockin' feet for?"

Blushing, Rollie Rondle sidled to the staircase for his clogs.

"I asked you how your Nain were some time back, but of course you were too fat an' lazy to answer. It were then you came, Sarah Ann. How is she, Rollie Rondle?"

Rollie was buckling his clogs and sobbing.

"Do you hear? Have manners afore strangers!"

Rollie ran from the staircase to Margit, embracing her.

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"Hers not ill?"

Rollie nodded.

"But hers not worse nor that?"

He hugged her wildly.

"Not—dead?"

He sprang upon her knee.

"Hey, Rollie, Rollie, I understand now. My poor frettin', lonesome, hearth-rug, staircase lad! Sarah Ann, let us go and see what can be done. I knew there was something a-rum-drum-drummin' one's usual senses out o' one's ears. But hark *now!* Now they're comin', though. Aye, that's Meg!"

"Why, she's callin' mother, Margit!"

"She's lisped through into even that," said Margit, with a smile of ecstatic acknowledgment that forced up a somewhat ready tear into each eye as she listened to the nearing calls. Quickly pressing her eyes, Margit went to the door, opened it ready, withdrew to the centre of the kitchen again, her nervous glances of growing delight passing from the still vacant doorway to Mrs. Dootson, and from Mrs. Dootson to the doorway. At last Ark and Meg appeared there.

Seeing Mrs. Dootson, Ark stood in the doorway to absorb to the full the pleasure of his surprise, and to give Meg time to master her shyness. She stood closer to Ark, with her last and loudest call of "Mother!" checked, her smile suddenly dulled, and her dark-brown eyes glancing inquiringly in their ample oval field of bluish white.

For a few rare moments of conflicting emotions, indeed, the pair formed a picture of browns, reds, purple, and black—deep cherry red in Meg's cheek centres, poppy red in her black hat, black in her hair, stockings, and boots, and the harmonized browns of a shadowy smack's sail in her jacket and frock. The purple was in Ark's velvet vest and glass buttons, and in a shining por-



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tion of an apostle's garment in a church window beyond, while he added to the brown with his jacket and wide-brimmed felt hat.

Margit coaxingly called, "Come in, little wipsy-wopsy-hopsy! Come in!"

Ark proudly entered with Meg, liberating her to her wish to run to huddle almost within Margit's cotton-print folds.

While Margit stooped and cuddled Meg nearer with both arms, Ark was shaking hands with Mrs. Dootson, who put one shawled arm, like a great gray wing, around his shoulders and pressed him to her. Then she patted his head, as she affectionately muttered, "I can feel that you've sprung up a bit, lad—you're up to my waist, sithee. I mind when you were only up to my pocket. Clockin' an' watchin' must agree with you, for though you're seven year taller, you look seven year younger. I *am* glad to come back to old Brink again, and to see Margit an' you lookin' as fresh an' chirpy as birdies, an' as comfortably feathered, too, and to see the round kitchen just as white an' bright as if I left only the night before last."

"Brighter," pleasantly answered Ark, "or it says nothing for my bits o' pictures. I picked them up at a house auction sale at Rochdale a year ago. Yon is Snowdon, see. I must go there some day."

"Aye?" remarked Mrs. Dootson, generously trying to be more interested in art than she by nature—even good-nature—really was.

"An' that is Rhuddlan Castle," he proudly added. "An' I must go there, too, one of these days; an' with Meg."

"Aye, aye!" she muttered, superficially glancing at the Castle, but directing a much sincerer gaze at what appeared to be big Meg sitting on little Margit's knee.

"The other's Morecambe Bay. I took that in memory



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of a rare cockle-seeking day, when a lass was down to her knees in quicksand. I helped her out, but went down to my waist mysen ; an' she had to help me !”

“I see you've a picture off the walls as well, lad ; a picture o' flesh an' blood.”

“Just so, Sarah Ann,” called Margit, kissing Meg on the brow. “Yes, an' she has roguey-pogey eyes an' bonny healthy cheeks !”—kissing her on each.

Margit led Meg towards Sarah Ann. “This is an old, old friend, little lass. Shake hands with her.”

Meg stood off and shyly bridged but half of the space with her partly extended arm. Mrs. Dootson bridged the other half, and, croodling down to Meg's height, she somewhat forced the friendship.

“Come, lass, love, don't hang back from Mrs. Dootson.”

“She'll be all right in a minute, mother,” put in Ark on behalf of Meg's flushing bashfulness. “Don't hurry her. Give her time. It's quite natural to her, Mrs. Dootson.”

“You're bound to know Sarah Ann, so you may as well begin well. You've shaken hands with her—in a way ; now give Mrs. Dootson a real nice kiss, one o' your double-double ones—for you ought to know, little wench, that the first lips of motherly love as ever kissed you in this house were this very same Mrs. Dootson's. Only for her you wouldn't be under this roof now. So kiss some o' that good old kiss back, and get a fresh one to be going on with.”

With full knowledge of the sensitive hesitation, Mrs. Dootson continued croodling, patiently waiting, with now and then a luring smile or an inviting action of the hand.

Nevertheless Meg held back.

“She won't just yet, mother,” said Ark.

Mrs. Dootson slyly muttered, “She will, if but you ask her, lad, I can see.”



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"Well, we'll try," answered Ark, bracing himself up for failure. He whispered in her ear, "Kiss Mrs. Dootson, there's a little woman!"

Meg moved forward almost crab-wise, cautiously embraced Mrs. Dootson's neck, and then, as if instinctively assured, quite suddenly kissed her.

"There now, Sarah Ann!" said Margit. "That quickness at th' last were worth waiting for, even to see, let alone to feel. Aye, Meg, go and sit with Mrs. Dootson. Make a new friend of her for yoursen, an' you double-make an old one for me."

Mrs. Dootson having had the satisfaction of all this without the humiliation of using a bribe, now brought from her dress-pocket a great orange. That clearly made the friendship complete.

"Meg's cheeks and an orange," said Ark, "always force me to think of marigolds in yon old brown jug."

"Only, in this case, son," said Margit, "the brown jug isn't old, and it's alive."

"Very much alive, sometimes," answered Ark, as he peeled the orange, and with a friendly grimace at Mrs. Dootson to direct her attention to Meg's interest in the event as she sat watching in a little arm-chair made by Ark.

Mrs. Dootson nodded back, and Meg was soon at perfect peace with the little planet in her hands and with the great planet under her feet.

"Hullo, Rollie Rondle!" called Ark into the staircase.

"Lors a-me," said Margit, "that reminds me! His gran'mother Nain is dead, Ark."

"So I was going to tell you. Poor lad!"

"Stay with him and Meg, Ark, an' I'll go along with Sarah Ann. Her may be buried by this, the lad has been here so long. But just before we go, Ark—it won't take a minute—I *would* like you to read Sarah Ann that scrip o' paper."

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"Which?"

"About Meg, lad."

"No, no!" said Ark, and flushed.

"Come, now—"

"No."

"Read, an' have done with it."

"I did that the last time, Mrs. Dootson—an' I haven't done with it yet! I'm not i' the humor."

"Then we are," said Margit; "an' you better take us whiles we are."

"Not if Ark doesn't want to," said Mrs. Dootson for his sake, and a little for her own, because she feared there might be some intellectual strain.

"But he does want, Sarah Ann! And you do, or will, when you've heard them. He'll be as proud as a Punch with two heads after."

"Mother!"

"Then I'll stutter an' spell at the paper mysen! Pass it. Come, lad, do it yoursen, just for Sarah Ann. Her'll like to hear about Meg. An' yon *is* so good. Old Mottram says so. It's worth doing by the penny-singers i' the' street."

Ark tittered. Margit's wink at Mrs. Dootson was a mother's private little flag of triumph.

"I'm sorry I ever showed them," he said, with modified protest, and rising. "They're only a bit o' fun for onesen," he said, casting a bird's-eye view towards his crowded bench at the window. "If I've read them to one," he added, in stronger protest again, "I've read them to a dozen!"

"Practice makes perfect, lad," and behind his back Margit poked her thumb into Mrs. Dootson's plump arm beneath its gray shawl.

As he approached the bench he said, "The other day, Mrs. Dootson, mother had the heart to call the curate in—an' us not church folk!—and fair shamed me out o'

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my common-sense, that came too late, to read them even to him !”

“And what were the compliments of the season you gained by it?” called Margit, pushing Mrs. Dootson’s knee as if by degrees she intended to press her marks of triumph on every limb. “Why, Sarah Ann, the curate said he might be able to preach sermons, but he couldn’t ripple off a ready-reckoner rhyme like that, for—”

“He said no such words, mother !”

“Well, he meant ’em ; an’ more ; a sight more. You don’t go by words only when folk talk. Talk isn’t the only talk. He said more nor two or three tongues could with them two blue eyes of his. *I* were watchin’ him !— bitin’ words out of his lip an’ wheelin’ ’em by the load out of his hat. However, lad, I know you don’t like the startings. You’re like a game horse that will an’ won’t. But just start right off an’ read ’em this last time once for all for Sarah Ann, an’ the asking will never criss-cross my lips for another body or soul. If an angel in heaven wants to hear ’em when we get there, I won’t ask thee.”

“It’s not that I mind you, Mrs. Dootson, only—”

“Now just you let ’em speak all for theirsens, Ark. You don’t clitter-clatter th’ tongue of a big bell when a clock’s goin’ to strike ; the Day o’ Judgment angel won’t say, ‘Now, Margit Millgate, get thy wits ready, and all thy best thinkin’ into the heav’nly side o’ thy head, for in five minutes I’m goin’ to blow the last trumpet mortal ears will ever hear.’ No, no ; the angel will blow it, an’ have done.”

“I wish he’d blow it now,” swiftly answered Ark, but languidly bringing from under a watch on his bench a folded sheet of paper. Slowly unfolding it with a slightly trembling hand, he sat on his low, broad arm-chair, rubbed his forefinger to and fro along his lips, and felt the back of his head as if testing the reality of his own presence. Then he drew in a great sigh, from the fully



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expanded top of which he looked over to Mrs. Dootson's strained and puzzled face and said :

"Perhaps you ought to know, Mrs. Dootson, that the little lass so often twisted the things I told her, out on walks, and at bed-times, that—"

"Hey, Ark, son, Sarah Ann has a woman's sense—quicker to touch than any man's. An' if her hadn't, the sense is all in the rhyme, like tears in the eyes, words on the tongue, or a laugh in the throat. Word off with it! Sarah Ann, or any other Ann, couldn't help but knit it up like stockin'-stitches, as you word it along. Besides, lad, think! think! You're only goin' to tell something about one child to the knowin' mother o' nine. That's all. And it's always a mother's marvel to me that a son as is clever enough to put things together in word, wood, brass, iron, broken china, or a hen's leg, hasn't a touch enough o' the commoner cleverness to see through that. You clever men folk, as can look at the sun, aren't half-moon clever enough to see the smallest ought in the night. Word it out, an' give other folks' senses a brain of a chance!"

Ark's pain was sharpened by this into two black points in his dark eyes. He looked across at his mother as if his very soul would prick her with the needles of vision. He almost flung the wretched paper behind him on the bench again; but, upon the impetus of another deep sigh, he pushed off, tremulously reading :

"Meg can tell you wondrous wisdom,
And her fancy never fails;
She improves your Christmas story
And re-tells your fairy tales.

"Quite as though she knows she tells you
That green cheese is made of moon;
That the clouds are columbining
With a clown and pantaloons;



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“That the stars are harlequining,
And the rain is fairies' tears,
Caused by Jack the Giant Killer
Slinging hailstones at their ears.

“Lo, to Meg, the sun at rising
Is Red Riding's little hood,
And the long red cloud at sunset
Is the wicked wolfy's blood.

“Then the crescent is the slipper
Cinderella must have lost;
And the winds are witches sweeping
Snow away from Jacky Frost;

“While the star we call the evening
Is to her Aladdin's lamp,
Hung high up above the heavens
For the Forty Thieves on tramp;

“And the rambling, rumbling thunder
Is the hunting in the wood,
While the whistle in the key-hole
Is the horn of Robin Hood.

“Then her breakfast egg's the palace
With the Yellow Dwarf inside—
Boiled too hard to do his mischief
To the little prince and bride.

“When the cats are weirdly calling,
Scratching fur out by the roots,
Meg believes poor puss is fighting
For the stolen pair of boots.

“Ev'ry sailor is her Sindbad,
Ev'ry goose is Sindbad's bird;
Ev'ry monkey knows her Crusoe,
Ev'ry parrot mocks his word.



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“Whittington is ev'ry schoolboy,
Though she calls, 'But where's the Cat?'
And the house that clever Jack built
Is whatever house she's at.

“Goody Two Shoes lives in London
With a boy called Little Blue,
Next-but-one to Mrs. Hubbard
And the Woman in the Shoe.

“‘Where is Jack the Beanstalk lodging?’
Once I asked between her breaths—
'Jack the Beanstalk?' said she, sighing,
'He has died such dreadful deaths!


“‘Oh, they put him in the cornfield,
Just to frighten off the crows,
And the wicked crowies pecked him,
Leaving nothing but his clo'es!

“Then I asked, 'And where is Beauty,
That companion of the Beast?'
Lo, she answers, 'Don't you know them?—
I am Beauty—you the—'

“Then her features flush repentance,
Then her arm around me darts;
Beauty hugs and Beauty kisses
Till the Beast in me departs.”

Ark finished nervously aglow, warmed into excitable good-humor again. He rose to replace the paper under the watch, but chiefly to avoid the pain of waiting for Mrs. Dootson's evidently confused intellectual powers to settle.

Margit slyly took the opportunity to prompt Mrs. Dootson into a quick word or two of praise by trebly tapping her in the middle of the back and saying, by



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way of text, "Isn't that a cleversome string-a-ring of it, Sarah Ann?"

Sarah Ann, as red as a robin, was struggling hard to select a safe compliment about something she had not understood; and as there were no signs of words in her face, Margit made a more urgent appeal for a quick bit of praise by pinching Sarah Ann's arm, while Ark was automatically putting this tool here and that tool there to occupy time.

A second and keener pinch from Margit forced Sarah Ann to openly say, "Give me time, woman! We're not all Margits an' Arks. You must remember I've put brains into nine childer an' left mysen rather without. It's a bit over-clever for me, Ark," she frankly said to his back.

"Not a bit!" put in Margit just in time to screw a knuckle into Mrs. Dootson's side before he turned round. "I could understand that if I were deaf, blind, mad, or dead. It's only Ark's own way of puttin' what Meg has said, Sarah Ann—that's all."

"Aye? I see. Then her's said a thing or two more nor any o' my lasses ever did. It's taken a head to put it to-and-to, an' it 'll take another head o' the same sort to take it to pieces; that is, sense by sense an' word by word, an' I couldn't pretend—"

"You and Mrs. Dootson go over to Nain Rowland's," said Ark, coming to Mrs. Dootson's rescue and his own. "Rollie can stay with me and Meg."

Margit and Mrs. Dootson went.

CHAPTER VI

“TO DREAM OF TRAVELLING MEANS CHANGE”

THE more Time went, the more Meg seemed to come. Time went until Meg came to seventeen. Margit decided upon a change of style—a pretty pink print cotton gown still somewhat like a girl's full loose frock at the bodice, but an unmistakably young woman's dress at the skirt.

Meg, because her skirts were lengthened, shortened her massive hair by coiling it into the form of the shining whorls of a dark-brown shell.

These two simple changes so suddenly advanced her in life one morning that Ark moodily went to the back garden to allow thought in loneliness to bid the very last farewell to her girlhood. He solemnly viewed her from a distance through the back doorway. It was like seeing her in perspective—a greater distance away from him. The morning sun was shining upon her as upon a possession growing in value but somewhat removed. She still looked young; but more superbly young, more alluringly young, because a beautiful evolution the older, with the significant promise of maturity now formally acknowledged forever. Meg, the girl, had gone; Meg, the maid, had come.

Next morning it was Ark's birthday. When he awoke and realized that he was irrevocably thirty, his feelings were like those of old age confirmed by some new infirmity. Thirty! He was middle-aged. It had come at last!



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He rose with an undergloom of sadness that was new to him. Life was too fleet. The delightful past seemed to be moving from under his feet and over his head. A new future seemed to hover about Meg—a future that might mean a change to them all even more revolutionary than death, for death leaves growth at rest.

And yet, Ark mused, Meg had as much right to the delights of growth as anybody else. Her turn had come; let her have it! Her life was her own. But was it? Yes. Her very own. Even if her growth did change all, was he to whimper and growl? No, no, no. Let her have her years to the full. To the full!

Ark went down-stairs. Tilted over his cup and saucer as a playful birthday greeting stood the half-penny mask of an old man. Peeping around the corner of the partly opened back door was Meg, roguishly expectant, hardly able to control her titters.

Ark knew she was there, and generously put the mask on. But Meg did not know, as she entered, laughing, that behind the mask tears of saddened middle-age were flowing down his cheeks. This was so, as he ran after her and caught her. It was so even, as in deep earnestness, and yet in grotesque superficial fun, he, with the mask still on, kissed her, and kissed her again, until his own lips burst through the lips of the mask upon hers. Ark broke into a strange, wild laugh at this unexpected shock, this unplanned tit for tat. Meg smartly smacked his laugh through his ear. He ran into the garden, chuckling, strangely proud of the tingling warmth in his ear that seemed to continue the warmth of her hand.

After that the whole of the day seemed to Ark like one of the younger days haunting and even mocking Time.

In proportion as Meg grew, Margit and Ark seemed to get smaller. By degrees the round kitchen seemed to become Meg's, Margit and Ark apparently taking to the

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lower places and the smallest chairs. Meg indeed became like a cuckoo in a nest of wrens.

Adverse circumstances caused Margit and Ark—especially Ark—to appear smaller than they actually were. Ark's business became a failure. Cheap watches and clocks had year by year lured his customers away with deceptive slowness.

To complicate the crisis, when at last it fully came, Margit would not hear of Ark going to the pit. Nor would Ark hear of his mother going to the pit-brow. Moreover, both had always resisted the idea of Meg doing anything. At one stage, a teacher, Rosie, had taught Meg in view of her taking a class; but Rosie died of consumption, and, as Margit had noticed that all teachers were pale, Meg was not allowed to proceed.

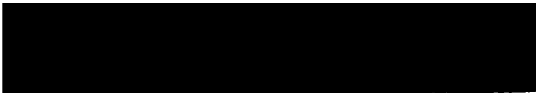
Something had to be thought of—nay, done. Ark was cornered with the bitterest vexations. He decided for the pit. But this sent Margit into concentrated fiery fits of temper, the more explosive because compact.

“The idea of you with all your head-and-hand cleverness going again to such work as that! I dreamt o' travellin' last night, an' that means change. A change for the better, maybe. Wait a bit.”

One day Ark was actually packing up his tools when she said :

“Take my word—don't move a peg. All last night I were flying as fast an' as silly as a bat, and that means a fall. Ark, stick where you can't fall lower! Some of the old eight-dayers will come in soon. Stay you home. I can't manage yon full-fledged lass all mysen, now.”

This was true. Ark himself felt that Meg was growing older than her clothes. She looked twenty—and her clothes only an immature eighteen. He was sure she required an affectionate guardianship—not whimsical,



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satirical, bitter in its very love, such as his mother was beginning to exercise.

To Ark, indeed, Meg was something ominous, mysterious, an existence more hazardous than his own. Everything in his life seemed fully formed. Even misfortune had become definite. But Meg's developments consisted of change upon change—all hot and molten one day, massed into sombre cold solids the next, and the next all ecstatic elements of apparently atmospheric surprise as much beyond his ruling as the fitful ethereal wafts from clover blooms and honeysuckle flames.

He simply looked on, joyous for her young joy; and yet joyous with the languor of melancholy as well, for the gladness in her, alas! now seemed glad quite apart from him. There was no leap towards him now, no cozy, nestling hug about his neck. In fretful secrecy he believed that she now saw him as the eyes of every young woman saw him in Brink-o'-the-Dale. He hungered for the old sway. But it was impossible. She was far, far beyond toys and fairy tales now. Not myths, but realities charmed her. True, Ark himself was a reality; but he was somehow too real. He was too real even to himself. He made gruesome contrasts between his own fixed dwarfish form and her beautiful growing one. It was like a myth at last realized. He wished impossible things. His wishes suggested miracles. Almost with curses he craved for height, stature, splendor, to keep pace with the fairy at last awake from his many dreams; and, as if in physical communion with the Fates, he sometimes went up into his room and secretly exercised himself, to try and modify the slight bend in his broad back and the hint of a bend in his left leg. But every night, every morning, his small clothes, hanging on a nail, showed him a too faithful caricature of what he outwardly was. He held, however, the most beautiful fancies within.



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Late one night he started up in bed from reading his tattered “Divers Extracts from Shakespeare,” and pencilled in the fly-page :

“O god of life, O god of love,
Why make me in this mould?
As well a frog might woo a dove,
A grub a marigold!”


Beyond this he could not write. He sank back overcome, hiding his face as if to be with visions only of himself and her.

All that morning the tempting grace of Meg's form, now so much taller than his own, lured him. The beauty of her eyes—yes, the over-beauty of those brown eyes which he could not now dare to fully look into—gave him double-edged thrills of rapture and pain. Then all thought of her gave him single-edged inevitable pain. For the first time he dreaded life. It seemed threatened by death—the death of hope, of love.

Meg was singing up in the back garden, hanging out a pretty pink print apron and some washed light-blue ribbons—singing, singing, with meditative anticipation of Mrs. Dootson's wedding-day picnic and Ark's birthday picnic, to be jointly held next day at King Charlie's Green in one of the hollows of the Vale seven miles away.

The favored guests at this annual double picnic had an additional enjoyment in the fact that it fell upon Midsummer Day.

One decorated spring-cart and horse took the variegated young and middle-aged guests to the scene of revelry. Another cart, not one flower and ribbon less decorated, took the enormous baskets of enormous meat-pies; cakes with quite an unusual allurements of raisins and candied lemon; Eccles cakes, luscious beyond the capacity of any mouth—even Rollie Rondle's—to be



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fully equal to the syrupy drip the moment a semicircular breach was made ; round, thick, home-made gingerbreads of special pungency for languishing palates ; cocoa-nuts with the milk of nature's kindness within their hard hearts ; the two big kettles, the two big tea-pots, the healthy pint bottle of specially ordered cream, and two coils of skipping-ropes to give urgency to appetite and vigor to digestion.

The principal guests in Mrs. Dootson's contingent were, first and foremost, herself, her two daughters, Jane and Sallie, her son Charlie, and Rollie Rondle, her lodger.

Those in Margit's party were Meg, Ark, Tom, a miner, and Tim, a baker.

As combined guests of the two hostesses were Sal Thornton and her husband Joey, because he could play two tin whistles like one ; 'Becca Bateson and her husband Ike, because no man had such enthusiastic appreciation of Margit's pies or of Mrs. Dootson's gingerbread, combined with a power to "make a joke an' take two." Ted Mottram, Will Starkie, and Dicky Thornton, a nephew of Mrs. Thornton, were included as so much young manhood for an equal quantity of young womanhood in Sue Slade, Poll Winwick, and Tilly Leyland.

The inseparable companions, Tom and Tim, were supposed to be counterpoised by Bess Kershaw and Jess Kershaw, twins, but no more alike than a burned-out dead cinder and a burning piece of live coal. Bess was the cinder, and Jess the live coal.

After the seven-mile drive and the good-humored unloading of the stores by all hands, Mrs. Dootson and Margit dismissed most of the company for an hour by Ark's watch.

"I'm for a bathe in the three-pound-trout pool!" Rollie Rondle announced.

This dulled Meg's expression. It also acted upon

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all the others of her sex like a decision that isolated them.

“You lasses go and paddle your ankles, and we’ll meet thee in half an hour,” said Rollie. “Now, lads! I’ll be like the fish to-day, an’ take my food in the water.”

“Nay, you won’t,” called Meg, looking at Rollie. As if she had pulled a string, his round, plump face suddenly smiled with affected comicality that was comic in fact, and she turned away flushed.

“Meg,” he called, “I’ll promise thee all my clothes—and there’s a new Sunday waistcoat among ’em—if you’ll bring me a six-by-three wedge o’ meat-pie, three saucer-sized Eccles cakes, four gingerbreads, and five pots o’ tea. Now then!”

Jess, the live coal, asked, “What would I do with your rags?”

“Put ’em on somebody’s bones,” said Rollie.

“Now, Rollie, are you coming?” called Ark, moving off to once more disconnect the increasing tendency to joke between Rollie and Meg.

“Well,” laughed Rollie, joining Ark, but calling back to the lassies, “if Meg will put mine on, I’ll put hers—as true as Joseph lost his coat, I will!”

Jess, with unusual heat in the coal, replied, “Her hooks wouldn’t meet on thee, lad!”


This prompted Rollie to stop, and ecstatic titters rose from all the girls but Meg.

“But thine would, Jess!” said thin Tilly Leyland.

“Hers?” shouted back Rollie. “Hers! Why, if you could get Jess’s o’er the head of yon old oak, hers could meet on the trunk without a split, I’ll swear!”

“Thank ye,” boldly called Jess; “I’m not ashamed on it.”

Meg now muttered to the other young women to move away, precisely as Ark muttered to Tim, Tom,



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Dicky Thornton, and Ted Mottram to put on speed to draw Rollie off.

Rollie hastened, saying, "Meg would do it in two twos," as he joined the group, which now also included Will Starkie, Ike Bateson, and Joey Thornton.

"But Meg wouldn't," replied Ark, quietly.

"She would, lad!"

"Never, Rollie. I hope not."

"I'll bet thee a Sunday hat she would if we worked her into the fit."

Ark, after all, was too much afraid that Rollie was right. He did not reply.

This had something to do with the fact that Ark was the first to startle the trout in the river pool. He did it by a dive. This he supplemented by vigorous swimming that took him through the deep brown water like a magnified yellow dwarf going to his home among the big boulders in the bed of the pool.

Rollie Rondle followed with a flat splash so dynamic that the whole of the water quaked and the birds fled. He wanted to swim under the surface as Ark was doing, but the laws of buoyancy were against him. He floundered in semi-bas-relief on the water, like something that was too much flesh to become a fish.

Ark swam to the surface, took in breath, and caught Rollie's heel to help him downward. But it was like tugging at a buoy.

Soon Tom, Tim, and others shook the water with their dives, leaving three on the bank—Will Starkie, Ted Mottram, and Ike Bateson—looking on.

By united pressure they all got Rollie six inches under water. He there struggled so strenuously for air that three of them seemed to be gripped in the grappings of an octopus, and only irresistible laughter all round set them free.

After that, they had wild fun trying to catch Ark, who

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could dart and swim under them, and even leap over them, with the slippery agility of a seal.

At this they fagged themselves, and then mounted the bank to lounge in the sun.

Ark soon took a running dive into the pool again. The others, with the exception of Rollie, began to dress. Rollie was looking about for something to dress with. Will Starkie moved away, laughing.

“Where are they?” demanded Rollie.

Then Ted Mottram laughed and moved away.

“You’ll have to go to the lasses for them!” jeered Will Starkie.

“By golly and I will, if they don’t send ’em soon! Have they been here for them?”

“Ike Bateson’s took them.”

“Well, I must have clothes; I must have somebody’s.”

“They’re going to see how you like picnicking without.”

“Are they?” muttered Rollie, exultantly, taking possession of Ark’s garments and beginning to dress.

Ark was just then in very deep communion with Nature—swimming, diving, darting, turning head over heels, again swimming down to the bowlders through water and sunlight, as if only water and sunlight would henceforth be his sole covering.

“Quick, lad, before he sees!” whispered Mottram.

“Aye!” urged Tom.

“Who would have thought Ark were as thick as me across the chest? See. And now for the breeches!” said Rollie, as the six companions, subduing their laughter, glanced at Ark sporting just below the surface like an undisturbed otter.

“You’ll have *breadth* for me,” humorously muttered Rollie to the garment, “but you’ll be about an eighth of an inch short in the legs, I reckon.”



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Up he drew the breeches, suddenly looking like some fat giant boy of a penny show, in trousers hardly lower than his knees. The picture of the giant boy was all the more complete when Rollie drew on Ark's short blue socks, which left Rollie's semicircular red calves exposed like two cheeks that had somehow become separated from some dairy-maid's face.

Rollie next slipped on Ark's purple velvet vest. This only looked like a buttoning chest-protector, and left a rather effective wide belt of white shirt between the vest and the trousers. For more grotesque effect, Rollie pulled the shirt a little all round in the manner of the Garibaldi, then much in vogue among the young women of the day.

The watchers now openly roared, with jokes and laughter.

Ark heard this when he was half-way in an unusually elaborate summersault. As soon as this allowed, he looked up. He then splashed to land as if not so much for clothes as for life.

Rollie had by this slipped on Ark's short but broad jacket, and was now tying on Ark's black-and-white-check scarf.

With great peals of laughter the seven fellows made off, leaving Ark like some aboriginal water dwarf who had made the unique mistake of stepping upon land where even the shrubs were thinly clothed.

"By my soul!" he murmured, forgetting that he was so conspicuously wet. "If Meg *has* changed with Rollie, I'll rip them from her back!"—also forgetting the problem as to how his primeval condition would allow him to carry out this moral indignation of civilized life.

He looked about. There was not so much as his check neckerchief left; only his low blucher boots. Their limitations were provoking.



“TRAVELLING MEANS CHANGE”


The seven fellows, now joined by Ike Bateson, stood a long way off. But their laughter came along the ground as if they were near. Ark ineffectually lifted his fist and stood like a new Adam cursing on a new earth. The very atmosphere seemed to have eyes. For the first time in his life Ark felt inconveniently big.

Fortunately the sun was gleaming with direct genial heat. Ark cast himself face downwards upon the balmy grass. The earthy aroma was delicious. The basking surrender to the active hot bath of rays was so mesmeric in its delight that with his eyes shut he lay picturing, wondering, dreaming. By degrees he pictured a future for Meg in which he perhaps would have to endure—unheeded, ignored, perhaps tricked, as he was tricked even then by Rollie ; nay, by them all.

Depressed, he tried to sink deeper into the long grass. Wishing to have done with all above ground, he pressed nearer to the earth as to a grave. What was Life? Something too little ! What was Love? Something too great—at least for him. He would have done with it ! Meg should have her way. He would be nought to her. Nought !

As after loss love protests with increased longing, so love sprang within him like a separate being in revolt. What was Life? Something great ! What was Love? Something for life to win ; yes, to win for life's own sake ! His heart beat quicker. The increased heat of life and love within him joined the sun's great heat without. His breath in the grass seemed to take passionate fire. He rose upon his knees, and saw in the sunlight two butterflies fighting in love, even on wing, tossing each other in joy, in pain, in deadly conflict, and yet in a conflict that seemed to give them more and more of life.

He sank with his face deep in the grass again. He for-



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got himself and realities in a vivid fancy of Meg, and involuntarily pressed his lips to the lips of the grass.

Like some keen act of worship, this gave him relief. He reclined as tranquil as if a wandering lost sound of the place had taken form in him to enjoy the silence of love and the stillness of life.

CHAPTER VII

THE REVENGE

ROLLIE RONDLE broke off two leafy branches of oak and, tilting one on each shoulder, ordered Tom and Tim to fall two and two behind, Ted Mottram and Ike Bateson behind them, Dicky Thornton and Will Starkie behind them, and Joey Thornton, Mrs. Thornton's husband, with a big branch in the rear.

As they began to march in mock military style for King Charlie's Green, they were espied by the lasses, who had been rambling. With shrieks and shouts the lasses raced each other, making the column of young men their winning-post.

Jess Kershaw won, arriving at the winning-post in Rollie Rondle's clothes.

The column was utterly disorganized with laughter. Two of the lasses actually took to the grass to give laughter easier play. Indeed, all but Meg were helpless with the most violent paroxysms of fun.

Meg very seriously read the full meaning of Ark's clothes being upon Rollie. In vain she twice scanned the ranks for Ark, and, puzzled, turned to survey the long meadow in the direction of the pool.

"Well!" chuckled Rollie, with husky merriment, as if he spoke through a reed for additional roguishness, and looking at Jess Kershaw—"well! it isn't often I get a chance to see mysen, Jess, and right handsome I look on thee. You make me clothes-proud. I must walk

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a bit more game-cockey, after this. I must put silver spurs on. I must wear a red comb. I must even crow a bit."

Jess, trying to be quite as masculine as the clothes she was wearing, looked unflinchingly at him.

"By golly goshens, Jess! you make a toothsome lad than you do a lass. I fair wish I were a wench for you to court me. Sithee here! Sithee!" he luringly called, making sly movements towards her.

But Jess, giggling, stepped back.

"Here!" He darted and caught her. She screamed in an effeminate gender not at all in keeping with her clothes. He forced her face to yield beneath his, and ferociously kissed her.

"You mustn't blame *me*," he said, kissing Jess again, she screaming the more. "It's *Ark* as is doing it. I never knew Ark was such a vixen for coorting till I got warmed up in his clothes. He's *making* me do it!" and he kissed Jess yet again.

This was too much for four of the lasses. Jealous of so much of that particular kind of fun going in the one direction, they attacked Rollie front and rear, rolling him on the ground in humorous severity. Some tickled him. Three lasses even held his big head firmly in the stocks of their hands, so that in keen irony Jess Kershaw, in Rollie's own clothes, could kneel down and steal back Rollie's thefts. This Jess Kershaw did with the compound suction of revenge. She even stole an extra one, bigger than the rest, "for damages" as she said.

"Here!" cried Tilly Leyland, to deepen this gratifying form of revenge, "we'll *all* have a turn!"

"Aye!" said Poll Winwick.

"Of course!" encouraged the roaring lads, "get at him," and roguish Rollie rolled and kicked, affecting to be free, knowing full well that the more vig-

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rously he struggled the more pleasantly would he be bound in a twelve-armed bondage of delight. Shrieks and screams rose from the girls and encouraging shouts from the lads; and Tilly Leyland walked on her knees to be ready in position to take her sweet revenge on Rollie's firmly held face; which she did, though the face grimaced like a mask.

Meg, fretful, nervous, agitated, was quite outside of this semi-amorous, hilarious fun. She sidled away, wandering off, feeling that she would like to set free the anger within her either by one short, great shout, or a slow flow of tears.

Alas! in the picnic cart, Meg, with Rollie's arm around her waist—true, he had his other arm around Jess Kershaw's—had looked forward to having so much exclusive rollicking fun. But, pooh! he was too cheap. Brazen Jess Kershaw could do anything with him! Wild blood flushed her face like a veiled flame. She walked fitfully, now quickly, now slowly, with her head moodily down, her pity for Ark taking her towards the river.

After vengeance to the very last kiss had been paid, the lads formed into column headed by Rollie. In Ark's singular clothes, he looked like a ruffled cock just free from a twenty-round fight. By his side stood froward Jess Kershaw, still in Rollie's clothes, and with one of the oak branches over her shoulders. The other lasses paired off on each side of the lads.

Thus they marched for King Charlie's Green, Rollie readily singing in solo one of Ark's own ditties:

“ Hurrah for each lad and his lass!
Hurrah for the trees and the grass!
A Midsummer sun,
A romp and a run,
A little good fun
For every lad and his lass!”

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This was followed by a chorus:

“Hurrah for each lad and his lass!
Hurrah for the trees and the grass!
A Midsummer sun,
A romp and a run,
And *lots* o' good fun
For me, my lads, and my lass!”

Mrs. Dootson and Margit received them with the merriest congratulations and laughter. It was “the most tip-top picnic joke they'd *ever* had.”

“But where is Ark?” asked Margit.

“He's dressing hissen with a bull-rush,” said Rollie.

“The lad will get cold! I must go to him,” Margit cried, rising to start.

“I'll dare thee!” answered Rollie, bringing Margit to her thoughts; and the girls tittered.

“I'd go!” said daring Jess Kershaw; but she slyly added the condition—“blindfold.”

“And Meg, where is she?” asked Mrs. Dootson.

“Aye?” cried Margit.

“Where?”

“Aye?” asked several, looking about.

“We've missed her without missing her,” said Rollie.

“I'll take meat-pie to begin with, thank you, Mrs. Dootson, after you've served these wenches. They're so hungry and greedy that they've been tryin' to eat a chap's cheek. They're regular cannibalations.”

“Well,” answered Mrs. Dootson, serving out the pie, “it would want a bigger mouth e'en than yours to gobble that, Rollie. You've enough face to fit up a theatre goblin. Now, lasses, help yourselves.”

“That's just what they have been doing! Hey, lads?” said Rollie.

“Aye!” answered the lads, and the feast began.

“Will none of you lads have the conscience of hunger

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to take Ark some covering so as he may come an' have something to eat?"

"Nay, nay," answered Rollie, making much of his meat-pie.

"Oh, dear, no."

"That would spoil the fun," added Rollie.

"He may be drowning!" appealed Margit.

"As well try an' drown an eel in its own oil as try an' drown Ark in water," continued Rollie. "He's high an' dry sunning himsen. Something queer may come out of it, for I've heard of ostrich eggs being hatched in that way. Most likely when we see Ark again, Margit, his shoulder-blades will have ostrich angel wings enough to trim Jess Kershaw's hat. Nay, nay, what am I saying? Trim the whole of it? Nay, only half of it!" Then, in rollicking irony for Margit's special satisfaction, Rollie sang one more of Ark's familiar snatches:

"'Ah, woe to me!' wept Wankie.

'Ah, so to me!' wept Sankie.

'Woe, woe to two!

What can we do?'

Wank wept for Sank,

Sank wept for Wank—

Oh, cranky Wankie Sankie!

"'Ah, glad am I!' laughed Sankie.

'Too sad am I!' chaffed Wankie.

'No! if you're glad,

Then I'm the lad

To drive you mad

And make you bad

And laugh to death,' said Wankie.'

Ark sprang up from his dream. With a running leap he cleft the water again. He swam down stream like some baby alligator that had suddenly thought of an



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appointment. Then he swam up again, in sheer enjoyment. Then down again to double the delight. Instead of returning, he mounted a slight bank and, panting, entered a little wood. He saw a coil of skirts. He knew them. They were Jess Kershaw's! She had taken Rollie's; Rollie had taken his. Why should he not take hers?

A thought of Meg answered why he should not. And yet, one trick deserved another. It was a picnic. He must make fun—and would!

Upon examination, he found two skirts and a dress complete. He pictured himself in female garments much too long, and chuckled. He could fasten the waistbands of the skirt around his neck. So pleasantly grotesque was this in fancy, that he at once slipped a skirt over his head, drew the waistband twice around his neck, and buttoned it.

The bell-shaped robe fell over his shoulders and down to his calves. He had the appearance of a candle night-cap with the head of the candle through the top and the leg through the bottom. He put on another skirt in the same way, looking somewhat overclothed. Then he put on the dress, but, as he could not hook it, he turned the back to the front, and, with a great struggle, hooked it there. The front was so long that he could not walk, so he turned it up in front and pinned it at the back, as a woman does to wash a floor. The back was left to form a long angled train—for this purpose the longer the better. Off he started for his boots. When he had gone some distance Meg appeared from behind a tree. He laughed, to give her the key-note of his fun; but she failed to laugh in return. Her dusky bright complexion looked yellow; and only by a strong will was she able to keep her tears below her eyes.

Ark was not very sorry to see her sad. It brought nearer him than she had been for some time. It



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made him feel a little her superior—a feeling of power she had not allowed him to have for many anxious months.

“You’re cold!” she said, feeling his brow. In the delight of this Ark forgot all that was grotesque.

“A lit-t-tle,” he answered, his teeth chattering, his eyes cast down, his heart beating quicker, as if making fun of him.

“And your hair’s—dripping! Ark!” she affectionately exclaimed, making much of the simple fact as her hand passed over the top of his head and down the back. “You’ll be chilled to death! Let me dry it!” and Meg even lifted the skirt of her pink print dress ready for him to bend his head, so that she should dry it. He complied—glad to hide his delight.

The situation was ridiculous—comical. No young man could possibly have presented a more ludicrously dwarfish aspect. No comely brunette could have looked more incongruously attentive as Meg rubbed the dank long hair of a rather large head peeping out of Jess Kershaw’s picnic merino dress of ultramarine blue.

And yet to them there was nothing ridiculous, comical, ludicrous, or incongruous at all. Ark was too grateful that they were alone under any circumstances whatever to feel that Meg, in the degree that she disliked Jess Kershaw’s success with Rollie, was somewhat selfishly glad of the temporary consolation of having even Ark. Nay, poor Ark had been fooled. She pitied him. She also had been fooled! They had both been fooled. She wished the picnic at an end.

“You have made my ear warm!” called Ark, as if from a mine.

“Which?”

“The left.” Meg forthwith worked to put equal warmth into the right.

“It’s lucky I came across these skirts,” said Ark, try-

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ing to justify his association with the outward and visible signs of bold Jess Kershaw, whom he knew Meg disliked.

Meg, however, did not answer, and continued rubbing.

"I'd have been starved."

Meg's only reply was more active friction.

"Hot as the sun is, I stayed in the water too long."

"It was shabby of Rollie Rondle," at last she confessed.

Ark, with his face still down, smiled in communion with himself. He said, "A lucky thing I met in with you, Meg."

Meg did not respond.

"Did you know of this?" he asked.

"I put two and two together."

"Your hand's getting the circulation up all over my head. I feel it down my neck. I'm getting as warm as a chimney-corner. I was going to make fun with these—these showy gee-gaws. Why should Rollie make it all? But I don't care now if I never set eyes on the folk all day long."

"Neither do I!" And, indeed, Meg did not.

"That 'll do nicely, Meg. I'm Ar!"

But Meg still rubbed. The situation was easier for her with his face down.

"I'm Ar, I tell you. I couldn't feel better. That 'll do."

"Your hair at the back's still wet," and Meg rubbed there with another part of her dress skirt, pitying Ark more than before.

"Now if we only had some of the meat-pies and ginger-breads, we could have a spick-an'-span picnic all to our two selves, couldn't we?"

"Yes. And I wish we could!" He ducked from her hands and looked up.

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Whether Meg was blushing, or was only flushed with the work, Ark could not tell, but her deep brown eyes above her dusky, coral-red cheeks looked brilliantly abashed, as if delight had been caught in the act and was increased by surprise. She swerved away.

"Are you laughing at me—at my dress?"

"No!" She joyously answered without looking around, for old memories of many, many delightful hours with this same devoted Ark thrilled tears of repentance and self-reproach into her eyes.

"At my head, then?"

"No!"

"At what, then?"

A laugh from Rollie startled them. This was followed by a rather ironical chorus of laughter from Jess Kershaw, Tilly Leyland, Poll Winwick, Dicky Thornton, Will Starkie, and Tom and Tim. Jess Kershaw, still in Rollie's clothes, kept up a separate, elongated giggle at the grotesque form her own garments took upon Ark; and the others supported her with their banter.

"Well," said Rollie Rondle, "when I fair really look at you, Ark-Jess-Kershaw, it's a wonder to me all the barks on the trees don't turn into dogs to worry you."

Ark freely laughed with them at that, and then demanded, "Give me back my clothes now, Rollie Rondle!"

"All right!" cried Rollie, adapting the idea, and pretending to undress by slipping the jacket off one shoulder. Just as he expected, Jess Kershaw, Tilly Leyland, and Poll Winwick screamed forth an ecstatic exclamation of affected shame, and started to run. Rollie smacked his knee, laughed derisively, and slipped the sleeve over his shoulder again. "I'll tell you what I'll do," said Rollie to Ark—"I'll exchange; you give me Jess Kershaw's, and I'll give you your own."

"No, Ark, don't!" impulsively said Meg, much prefer-

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ring to see Jess Kershaw's clothes on Ark than even fancy them on Rollie.

"Oh, oh!" cried Rollie to Meg, "what has Jess Kershaw's clothes, or my clothes, to do with you, good lass? As long as you stand in your own, you're all right."

"Aye, indeed," called Jess Kershaw, with a slight toss of her jealous head. "You put them on, Rollie, if you like," boldly added Jess, eager for the novel honor, "you'd do them more justice than Ark does."

"I should think he would," laughed Will Starkie, with cruel point.

"You needn't put in your addle-headed motto!" retorted Ark, looking all the wilder with his passion so grotesquely garbed.

Jess Kershaw chuckled and clapped her hands. The more fun that came out of her clothes the better for her prestige in a picnic that had taken such an extraordinary turn.

"Who's addle-headed?" called Will Starkie, facing Ark.

Ark's fist on Will Starkie's eye gave knuckled emphasis to the word "Thee!" And an instant later Meg's flat hand smacked a cynical smile at Ark clean off Jess Kershaw's red face. In a moment the two pairs were interlocked, struggling. Ark's bandy left leg came from under his skirt and tripped Will Starkie on his back; while Meg's two hands went, as if straight out of her shoulders, to take passionate possession of Jess Kershaw's raw red hair.

"Hullo!" cried Rollie, spreading out his arms, "clear the field for Trafalgar, an' sweep the deck for Waterloo!"


But the two battles were more quickly over than they had begun. Will Starkie rose with a cautious look in his reddening left eye; Ark standing on the defensive, like a fiend, neither woman nor man. Jess Kershaw looked like a Rollie Rondle suddenly turned into an emotional woman, with her red hair down and a tear of repentance

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in her eye; and Meg, like a fiery guardian angel, as near Ark as she could be without confessing too much feeling for the object she guarded.

"Oh, thunder!" exclaimed Rollie Rondle, with affected deep disappointment; "is it all over?" and the others gladly laughed for the sake of peace. "Why, the way they began, I made sure that Meg Nelson an' Ark Wellington were going to make a week's cruise of it. It's nought but cheating a chap out of a war, is this. I were getting my hands ready to clap the first blood. I've a good mind to take the four on ye, just for the sake of England, home, and beauty!" and Rollie assumed a fighting pose, Ark's little garments looking as if they had been placed upon a figure that had the power of expansion. "Stand up, any six on ye—any dozen on ye!" and Rollie struck Tom a friendly smack on the left cheek. He gave Tim a rather less friendly one on the right, then fisted Dickey Thornton on the shoulder, and with the most vigorous hostility he hugged Tilly Leyland in one arm, Poll Winwick in the other, and buffeted the one against the other until they laughingly struggled away. "I'll take any man, woman, child, or tree i' th' condarnation field!" he cried, affecting to give a thick oak a swift right-hander in the eye, a deft lefter straight on the nose, and an illusive double-handed concussion below the belt. "Fight? Fight? I feel like a up-guards-and-at-'em Dukey Wellington, and a England-expects-every-man-to-do-his-duty Lordy Nelson, and a Boney Bonaparte before Waterloo all rolled into one champion man-o'-war. Fight? I'd fight even myself if you only had a big lookin'-glass here—aye! and send myself to quicksilver smithereens in a crack! Fight? Lor! I thirst for every one o' yer's bleeding blood!"

Ark tittered. Even Meg laughed. Will Starkie tried to look as if his sore eye were quite an indifferent prehistoric affair. Jess, however, still frowned with the



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humiliation of having lost about a dozen of her hairs. So Rollie added :

“Fight? Stand up, all on ye! an’ give a chap as *has* pluck something to work upon, you pigeon-headed parcel o’ patchwork jim-cracks!”

The general merriment shamed even Jess Kershaw into smiling. At the sight of this, Rollie said to Ark, “Well, if you *won’t* fight a fair an’ square fight with a chap, eat a fair round meal with me!” And Rollie brought from behind a tree a basket of meat-pie, cakes, gingerbreads, and nuts, which he had brought for Meg and Ark, and, as it transpired, for himself as well.

CHAPTER VIII

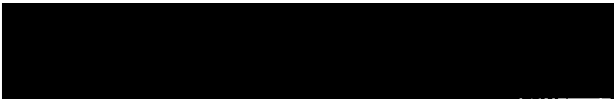
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ARK's clock business became hopeless. In defiance of another ominous dream dreamed twice over by Margit in the same night, he decided to seek clock-work elsewhere. With a contradictory maternal curse of affection on his head, Ark went on tramp.

He reached Manchester. More clockmakers were out of work than in. He went to Rochdale, Bolton, Preston. At most of the places masters looked at his height and shook their heads. To one at Preston he said, "You don't want a six-foot giant and a ten-ton crane to lift in a watch-spring!" That answer obtained him three days' cleaning. He reached Clitheroe and crossed the border into Yorkshire. For some mysterious reason Yorkshire watches and clocks wanted repairing less than Lancashire ones.

In a month's time he had sent less than a week's wages home. At Leeds a letter in Meg's large writing, but in Margit's phrases, asked him, "What do you want wasting time and shoe-leather up there when four clocks and three watches for repairing hang here on your own wall?"

Ark heard that hands were wanted at Prescot, a great watch centre near Liverpool, and he tramped there with the idea of striking homewards. It must have been irony, for at Prescot he was told that at least a dozen idle watchmakers would gladly carry him either



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to the high-road for Liverpool or the high-road for St. Helens.

Liverpool sounded suggestive, and he tramped along the undulating black cinder-paths to that port.

He was exceptionally fortunate. He was actually engaged to help to clean the Town Hall clock. Elevated in that central dome, he combined work with occasional dreamy gazes at the Mersey—that glorious length of activity of wave and craft; the gleaming river tapering silvery among hills to the south, and nobly broadening and darkening to the open sea to the north.

Now and then he changed his dreams by gazes at the apparently inextricable lacery of rigging and masts, spars and funnels, in the long black forest of the docks; or at the mansion-dotted green Cheshire hills in front, and the blue Welsh mountains beyond.

Sometimes he sought amusement by looking immediately below. He watched business men, looking as though they were entranced in miniature, walk like two-legged flies silent and erect, racing up and down the streets, running in and out of doorways; each fly intent only upon its individual grain of sugar hidden in some nook of the town. From that height all men were dwarfish, and the thought gratified him.

At dinner-time Ark used to go down Water Street, and pass through Tower Buildings into St. Nicholas's church-yard.

He would sit on a flat, illegible gravestone with only a faint trace of angels' wings; and with his back to the warm church wall and his face to the sun he dined among the audaciously important office boys, listening to their autobiographical chatter, their higher criticism of masters, managers, and clerks; and watching the terms of their partnership in a joint-stock brier-pipe that was passed round on communistic principles—six

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puffs each to begin with, three each to slow down upon, and two each to finish with.


Very often, however, Ark sat soothed into fanciful lethargy by the musical rumbling and drumming of the loaded lorries lumbering along the heavily paved dock quays, with now and then the comparatively high note of the clang of a horse's shoe on a prominent stone set; the still higher whistle of an urgent steamer on the river; and the funeral and wedding bells of the different ferries: the whole symphony of sounds suddenly shocked into silence by the masterful big-drum boom of the one-o'clock gun. This was always a humorous climax to watchmaker Ark, for at the sound of that time-regulating gun every man and lad with a watch brought it out and bent his head over it, as if saying some mid-day prayer at a portable little shrine.

One day in the balmy heat, during a lull of the drumming of the lorries and carts, Ark heard the dim twitter of a church-yard sparrow, and the cooing of pigeons on the church turrets above. These sent his thoughts like homing birds to Brink-o'-the-Dale. A rare mood of sympathetic homesick fancy overcame him, and, as if in an open-eyed trance, he pencilled on the envelope of a letter from Meg:

“You may talk of buzzing bee
Humming honey from the flow'rs,
But the blithest bee to me
Is that humming Meg of ours.

“You can hear her from her room,
Down a double pair o' stair,
As she croons with hand and comb
To her harp of bonny hair.

“You can hear her in the croft,
Hear her louder in the lane,
While her echoes high aloft
Like her fairies call again.



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“Oh, you bonny Meg of ours—
Nay, you winsome Meg o’ mine!
I would part with all the flow’rs
For that posie-look o’ thine!

“I would part with all the song,
Howsoever sweet the air,
For the music of your tongue
Down our double pair o’ stair.

“Here I picture with my eyes,
Here I hearken with my brain,
Till the tears of love arise,
Drowning all in Life again.”



CHAPTER IX

MUSIC HATH CHARMS

At the very time that Ark was writing,

“You can hear her from her room
Down a double pair o’ stair,”


Meg, in the sunlight up in her garret, was indeed crooning with her hand and comb to her harp of bonny hair. She, however, was not setting the music of her fancy to humdrum thoughts of Ark. No, no ; but to more stimulative new thoughts about the fair, curly-haired young organist at Millgate church.

Three weeks prior to this, the organist, walking down the Black Cat’s Tail, had heard Meg singing, and he induced her to join his choir.

This provided a new range of sensation so different from the monotony of the Old Mill House that now all days but choir-practice days seemed dull. They were no doubt dull in some measure because of the absence of Ark ; but Meg was too preoccupied with the delights of the new experience to realize that it was so.

Indeed, owing to what she heard in whispers from other members of the choir about the organist and his unhappy home, Meg’s sympathies little by little swerved from old associations towards new ones that keenly called her imagination into play.

With picturing sympathy Meg liked even to put her thoughts to pain by watching the pleasant face of Owen



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Mowcroft become troubled as he played the psalms and hymns, or practised some voluntary for Sunday.


At close quarters such as this, with the organ light full upon his face, the inviting ivory pathways of the keys before him, and a realm of harmonies momentarily answering to the touch of his hand and foot, Owen Mowcroft's pronounced musical nature seemed to give even physiognomical expression to itself, as though he played so much of the treble clef that its sign had taken partial form in the profile of his Roman nose and the clearly cut continuation of the nostril curve. The bass clef, strange to say, was clearly definable in the form of his ear. Chants and church music might have made his oval blue eyes into perfect breves; while miniature fair curls of varied notation, from the little curved flat to the demisemiquaver, had musical settings along the top of his slightly arched brow or about his ears.

His fair mustache, tapering to points faintly turned down, was a symmetrical "brace" (~~~~); but, alas! his lips beneath were suggestive of the marked character of a "slur" (—).

If the tension of playing were very great, a movable staff of five lines and four spaces came and went upon his brow, calling into play inherited and acquired wrinkles which faithfully gave him the troubled look (always particularly pathetic to Meg) of being old before his time.

And yet, as if to compensate for these, the rounded, shadowy dimple in his perfect chin was a cheery note in pleasant harmony with his eyes—blue blue eyes, which at their happiest and best were like two far-off sounds of ethereal serenity that had been transformed into the silent azure of personal fancies, affections, and dreams.

After that night's practice, and when the choir had gone, Owen Mowcroft as usual continued to play selections from Handel, Beethoven, and Bach. He did this

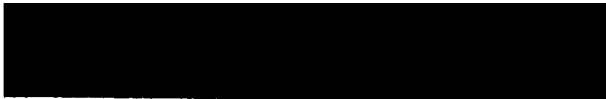


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for the love of playing, and to postpone as late as possible the unwelcome time when he would have to go home.

He played with unusual emotional energy for more than an hour. At nine o'clock he locked the organ. His brain felt fagged ; even his feelings were wearied. As he sat motionless on the organ seat a discomfoting, shuddering thought of home passed like a chill along his warm feelings. The thought seemed to come to him from the dusky bye-lane where his home, "Broomhey," stood like a central concrete gloom within the more diffused gloom of its overrun garden and shadowy high wall. As he sat thinking, years of results presented themselves to his mind as a fully accomplished shame that could no deeper go. He saw everything at home as an external symbol of internal ruin. He recalled the old corroding wrought-iron entrance gate that had not been used or painted for fifteen years ; the crumbling, broken-headed stone pillars ; the grassy, weedy garden path ; the seven long moss-sealed steps ; the blistered, faded red door, gruesomely emblematic of the face of the man he reluctantly called father. Stamped upon his brain he saw once more the round, unused iron knocker of the front door. The woman's face in its centre was veiled by a thick spider's web, veiled into a dim bas-relief of his mother's impenetrable sorrow. The dusty semicircular fan-light once more revealed to his fancy a dustier bust of a mute and inglorious Milton, like the forgotten phantom of some social Paradise Lost never to be regained.

The whole had something of the newness of an embittering final shock. He rose. He left the church. The intensity of his feelings caused him to pass Bingham's Broo leading homeward, and to moodily walk down Millgate Lane instead. He walked and walked, as if into thoughts of his mother and sister and even of that pitifully faithful Ann Jane Jones, the little middle-aged




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black crow of a servant of all work from the mountains of Wales.

And well he might so walk, for some of his mental pictures were being enacted into living ones by the sternest facts. Ann Jane Jones, as black as charcoal in hair and eyes, as pale yellow in the face as cream-laid paper, as red and wrinkled as a carrot in the hands, was bending her lean figure over the hand-rail on the first landing in "Broomhey." She was eagerly listening, looking down the dimly lit hall—she also face to face with a crisis, and rapidly going over her accumulated thoughts of years.

"Indeed, but 'pon my heart and honor," she mused with a muted wail which almost became loud, "but this house is ten times less of a true home than the lonely whole mountain that stands without any thatch but the clouds and heavens. It's as changed as a clean white nut dried to its skeleton of a skin since my poor missis brought me against my will by coach, and against my strength by boat over seas bigger than the hills; yes, and, I begin to think, against some of the will of the Lord of goodness, for it's left me with a heart as sore as a scald. Changed as an old moulting mother hen is this home; changed as a sick sheep losing her wool. Oh, dear, missis, but you've been *too* Welsh; too gentle you've been with the villain. My two hands and feet could put it into my heart to choke and stamp him my own self, only for the thought of my Maker and the last day. Poor missis! But more than ten thousand times poorer, poor, pitiful *miss*! Now not one-quarter of a quarter the young lady she *should* be—by rights. And her so tempting beautiful at one time! So like a sweetheart for the very best that could love. But now, twenty-five, and no eyes but sad eyes or drunken eyes to look upon her. An angel turned out of heaven for not keeping her robe white could not look more lost than Sabina this night. But who *could* be white with a man turning



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life to dirt? I'd sooner see my own heart on a butcher's hook than let it go beating through fifteen years of his sly murder again. And now clever Master Owen is touched. Dear Owen—Welsh in everything but his father and his father's ways—clever Owen, who can finger music out of a stick—*he* is going wrong now. Oh, master, master, my heart turns back and inside out with it all! Creatures of your own flesh are no more to you than winter flies on a barn cobweb. What did the Almighty give you His own powers of creation and destruction for? Not much wonder that with such veins as yours in him Owen's bad blood has begun; no wonder that *he* spoils the nights and days for us now; and no wonder, too, if he'll grow into a drink Bwgan of your own mad kind at the worst, to plague your body and soul in your all-night Bedlams of telirium dremens. The Lord's own truth to tell, I'd love Owen to plague some of his loudest music out of your bones with a stick when you have the devils and all their works in you. Pity you? Pity, my man? *I* say, pity the devils themselves when they're cast into you to live there for mornings, afternoons, and nights. If the Almighty made *me* a devil to be cast into you, I'd pray hard for a miracle to cast me out again, and for decency's sake to put me into a respectable hog, for, compared with you, man, many lead decent, sober lives on my home mountain near Denbigh. I'd sooner be the wife of an old crow who could say no more than caw, caw; for he *would* come early to roost; for he would rise in the morning, instead of having some of the night over again with brandy and not a crow's bite of food to it. The miracle of life, death, and torments is your *last*—unless the Evil One fires you with his flame to keep you in, ready, alive, for the Great Day. At any rate, then, my man, the Angel of Darkness won't have to carry a candle to find you. Villain, villain, when will you come home and let us go to rest? And oh, Master Owen,



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dear Master Owen, when will you come in to let my poor missis and me take our tears to our beds?"


At that moment, in the dingy, neglected back-parlor down-stairs, where the mother and daughter spent most of their days and nights, fresh tears started to the dark, sunken eyes of the crushed woman, who, though her husband was living, was a widow of sorrow.

The fresh tears were forced out by the strain of unbearable pain that had passed into the face because that night of nights she definitely felt that the best of her clever son Owen was dead, and that only a doubtful successor was living to haunt her with the horrors of a future like his father's. She tried to hide her tears from Sabina; and Sabina, for the mother's sake, took up a book.

But reading was out of the question. The book was only a screen behind which Sabina could think the more deeply of how, by countless blighting circumstances, all her maidenhood had been turned into a total blight. Ability, aspiration, social ambition, personal pride, desire for friendships—all had gone. The aerial castle-building, out of which reality some day intended to shape itself, had been wrecked.

Sabina had brooded her heart into aches. The rich black eyes, twin young ones of her mother's, had become dulled by an inward gloomy prohibition of the girlish vivacity of younger days. The eyes had almost lost the impetus to rouse themselves from their sombre stupor to the wakefulness of a smile—unless it was a modified smile of consolation for her mother, or a saddened smile of appeal to her father.

Year by year her oval, dimpled face—once a face with the forerunning coy delight of dormant love in it, a face inviting love, with a quiet gladness in its repose and lurking amorous humor in its smiles—year by year its joyous mobility had gone. It had become stilled and



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paled, like the animated face of a brook fixed by a silencing layer of ice.

But now and then tingling flushes of shame, searching and yet unsearchable, burned her thin face, for her father's life thrust a grossness upon her innocence with such violence as to outrage it. Sensitive Sabina, whom outsiders would not have dared to shock ; Sabina, the beautiful, modest one from whom in earlier days froward girls at school had instinctively withheld ; Sabina, whose face was a plea for gentle sweetness and purity, had been defiled by the knowledge of bestiality as it nightly entered the house—sometimes seen, sometimes unseen, but always known in the person of her father, vulgarized and violent : a man who went to and fro from home to business as if both business and home, and even the day itself, were secondary adjuncts of life, the primary centre of life being night and certain bar parlors.

In the earlier stages she used to sit awake in her room each night, too uneasy to undress—waiting. The thud of his irregular walk up the garden path, the sound of his uncertain foot up the steps, the trembling gropings with his latch-key, his re-echoing mutterings as he entered, and his shuffling shamble up-stairs, all were eagerly followed by her at her bedroom door, ajar. Not until she heard the click of the bolt of his bedroom door re-sound upon the quiet landing ; not until she made quite sure that there was, oh, such gracious silence between him and poor cowed mamma, could she begin to prepare for bed.

Even then it was to lie awake with her candle lit, eagerly listening, afraid to hear the down-stairs silence broken by the wandering sound of her father's foot descending to the dining-room again, where he would knock against a chair, or kick the fender, or drum the sideboard cupboard searching for the handle in the dark, or let a glass or decanter fall like a crack of doom.




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Not only Sabina's individual life, but all life as a whole, had become overshadowed. It had been discouraged at all the starting-points for progress. She had been checked and shocked by shame. Both mother and daughter yielded to it. They sank under it. They allowed the home to drift, drift, drift, into cheerless stagnation. Now and then, half roused, half hopeful, they made efforts to free themselves from their surrender to the worst; but after a vain struggle the sadness worked its way into them, through them, and they sank back into household darkness again. Old friends, by almost imperceptible degrees of desertion, ceased to seek them, ceased to call upon them, and finally ceased to "know" them, except as social traditions of tragedy upon which to base moral reflections at a distance.

Sabina and her mother, it is true, really did not want society. They preferred to be free of its contrasts, for what could society do but remind them of the change? This was disastrous. Left so much alone they fell into a sluggish sorrow that was itself demoralizing. They had no courage to struggle even with themselves. A lethargy of domestic hopelessness overcame them—while society looked on and wondered.

Even the natural and healthy desire to consider appearances was chilled in Sabina just as she was becoming gently conscious of the prestige of beauty, entering that ecstatic state of the butterfly when it first takes flight on its colored wings; when beauty subsists on beauty, when beauty is added to beauty, when the heart blossoms in adornment, when the unexpressed aspirations, desires, and dreams of developing life seek avowed expressions of delight.

Many Sabinas at this period of everlasting hope would not have relinquished such momentous delight; but Sabina Mowcroft had grown to ignore the stimulus of personal pride. The motive power of legitimate ambi-




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tion to keep her going in defiance of everything had gone. She was sad—she knew it—she knew why—what did it matter how she looked? Mere appearances would not alter the grim facts at the base. But she did not see that sometimes appearances make new facts, and that new facts might have saved her from herself.

After the first spiritless dressing in the morning, Sabina's attire would remain unattended to in any way all the day long, unless she went out, which she very seldom did, and then it was only to save her mamma the trouble of getting into her out-of-date black silk, and the pain of being seen outside her own home. By the afternoon Sabina's beautiful black hair dangled in loosened loops about her brow, her ears, and even down her cheek; and, except for an occasional touch with her fingers—a touch not too strong lest it might commit her to doing something more—the slack loops remained slack through all the uneventful afternoon and far into the ever-eventful night.

There was a certain abstract pictorial effect in Sabina's negligence taken in conjunction with her beauty; but it was the pictorial effect of a ruin. Morally, there was something unspeakably sad in it—something pre-sageful of demoralization; of even death itself. No one could have seen that creature with the obvious possibilities for ardent activity in love and life, at mid-day, in the afternoon, or at night—neglected—neglecting—apathetic—even indolent—without feeling that life was sadly adrift, and that, if she did not watch those minor degradations, there were still deeper and grosser degradations into which she would be liable to fall. Poor Sabina bemoaned the fate of her father; others might have bemoaned the possible fate of the drifting mourner herself.

It was in this stranded, half-wrecked condition that Sabina sat in the dingy little back-parlor of "Broom-




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hey," an apartment that was soiled, worn, over-used, unrenewed, and as touching as Sabina herself. It also had a blighted look—as if, just because it was lived in morning, noon, and night by Sabina and her mamma, it not only became worn, but partook of their sadness, and came to have, with them, a general discord of neglect. The books, the music, the pictures, ornaments and knick-knacks were left in precisely the same places, unvaried, unchanged, for months. They, too, looked alienated, unheeded, sad.

True, Ann Jane Jones—far more heedless herself than in the early days—now and then promiscuously dusted them, on the easiest possible principle, by turning her cheeks into a little bellows; but no glad heart, no deft hand, and no surveying eye took them down, polished them with a right good-will, and refixed them, playing the gratifying changes upon them that their color and form were capable of.

The piano was always closed—towards night even dusty; and if Sabina or her mamma, with a feeble return of the old feeling, lifted the lid and touched the keys, the instrument yielded a sound as of a plaintive out-of-tune reproach. Even music was almost dead in them—a fact with unspeakable pangs for Sabina and her mother when they remembered their gifts, their possibilities, and their swamped hopes that Sabina's unusual talent would some day bring her before the public as a singer and player.

It was of all this that Owen Mowcroft the organist thought so intently when he avoided Bingham's Broo leading home and continued to walk down Millgate Lane. He continued to think so intently that even the familiar garnet-like lamp of the Mill Stones Inn, a little ahead on the right, took him by surprise. Very soon, however, the surprise became like that of seeing an old friend at a distance. It suggested pictorial musings as to who



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was chairman for the night, and if the company had any one to play "the flat-iron," otherwise the quaint old Broadwood with its yellow, bone-like keys.

He resisted all this, deciding to work round to the left, homewards.

Later on his feelings protested. He took them a longer walk. In a little while he turned to the right, crossed Millgate Lane, went between a short double line of white cottages known as Myrtle Row, to the right through dark Back Moon Street, to the right again up well-washed Paddock Yard, then under a red lamp with a white indicating hand on it, through a green cheery back doorway, along a clean flagged lobby, and into the spacious back bar parlor of the Mill Stones Inn, with its nightly renewable carpet of yellow sand and little oval tables polished beer-brown with constant service.

The tables were backed by ruddy companions so merrily akin to each other in their loud laughter as he entered that Owen regretted having played at the organ so long.

"Better late than never, Master Owen!" called the burly chairman, Josiah Marbeck, the tanner, who lifted his toddy with one hand and tugged the bell with the other. Owen Mowcroft, by natural selection, had room made for him near the flat-iron.

"We've missed you, Mr. Mowcroft," called the social superior of the company, a horsy bachelor who almost nightly rode three miles home on his fine gray mare.

"Aye, we have so, sir; nobody's touched a key except Kitty, there."

Kitty with her fair-haired head and half her pink dressy form was peeping around the bar partition with a combined nod of greeting and inquiry at Owen.

As if an old world lost had suddenly been found, Owen playfully kissed his hand and directed an ordering nod at Kitty, as well understood by her as a nod at a public sale.

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Kitty soon entered with Owen's glass of rum hot.

"The biggest glass of rum in the house always goes there—see, gentlemen," called the chairman. "Hey, Kitty, Kitty!"

"Aye, I wish *I* was a church organist," added the horsy man, winking, "then she'd put *my* sugar in for me," and Kitty, knowing that the horsy man did not like sugar to his whiskey, crossed the floor, and dropped two big lumps into his glass. With a titter and glance at Owen she skipped out.

"Look here, Mr. Mowcroft, it isn't fair deserting us," said a miller's son, airing a sense of humor that was growing by similar nightly practice in this circle he had lately joined. "Kitty isn't half Kitty when you're not here; and I beg to propose, gentlemen, that Mr. Owen Mowcroft be expected here every night, not only for the sake of his own company, gentlemen, but for the sake of Kitty's and our own. I can see, gentlemen, that we'll be better served."

"Who seconds the proposition?" called the chairman.

"I will! Aye, and go further. Hang me, further, gentlemen!" said a very ruddy man, rising carefully, like a full autumn moon amid marsh-mists of tobacco-smoke. "I propose—hang me, I go further! I—"

"Tha's gone far enough, Richard; sit thee down. Tha'll fare far worse."

"I'll come as far as you, Dick, and we'll see who'll fare worse then, if you—"

"I'll dare thee—outside o' thy mother's arms."

"*Gentlemen!*—I say I go further—further than the prop—than the propo—"

"Just give Richard a prop up, Joseph."

"Than the propo—zish—"

"Out with it! Aye, take another sip, lad; proposition's dry."

"I say I go further—" but Richard sat down, looking,

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however, as gleaming as if he had concluded one of the most illuminative propositions man ever made to his fellows.

"Let's see," said the chairman, eyeing the company, "we've got bass, and tenor—and soprano in the bar—now, Mr. Mowcroft—if—you—*please*—let's have a bit of 'Hallelujah'!"


Glad of relief from thought and talk, Owen turned to the piano, and struck the chords of encouragement for the basses and tenors to prepare for their familiar piece of Handel.

Owen himself led off with the bass. The chairman followed, like a double-bass fiddle. Tenors linked in, and a tipsy tenor, out of sight at the bar, tried to sing a falsetto soprano. Kitty left the bar for the parlor, stood behind Owen at the piano, and marshalled the other straggling voices into order by her commanding soprano ring.

Owen sang and played the chairman into a state of apoplectic perspiration. Hallelujah Chorus beads ran like notes down his brow and joined those that ran down his face from his eyes. He was like music made liquid. He looked as if he would soon wholly dissolve into his clothes and boots, and never be seen solid again. The non-singers laughed and even joked him. Nevertheless, he sang on. He was fast losing breath—he gave out so much and had time to take in so little; nevertheless, he continued at even higher pressure, straining his veins blue and his eyes red; looking as if, by the most deliberate choice, he revelled in the frenzy of a spirit of both good and evil that possessed him.

A discerning young chemist became alarmed, and in the name of life, as it were, called upon the man to stop.

But the bulky, boisterous chairman sang on, even rejoicing over the reply he intended to make at the close—namely, that he had sung Handel's echorus for thirty



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years, and had resolved to come in at the finish *that* night if he hadn't breath enough left to call for his coffin.

And he did sing to the end; but at the very last gasp of the long "Amen" he fell heavily over the little table in front. It was indeed "Amen" with him—he was dead.



CHAPTER X

IN THE DEAD OF THE NIGHT


INSTEAD of this crisis sending the clients home earlier than usual, it did the reverse. Every one acted as if there were greater risk of dying of too little solace than of too much, and all took extra precaution to keep themselves sympathetically alive.

This view was also taken in the bar parlors at the three other inns. The result was that brisker business than usual was done that night, and up to the very last tick of the legal time.

When Owen Mowcroft rose to the landlord's eviction cry, "Now, gentlemen—time's up," he seemed to himself to be thinking with two sets of brains, feeling with two sets of emotions, and mumbling with at least two mouths—the two organs, however, not turning his doubled ideas into words with that automatic lucidity which is the compensating ease for all the other troubles of speech.

At the foot of Bingham's Broo, Owen fell in with a human derelict as whiskey-and-water-logged as himself. Each overladen vessel thought the other craft was carrying a light freight, and could take a more burdened vessel in tow as far as the house called "Broomhey." Not until they had got alongside and joined hawsers, arm in arm, did Owen Mowcroft discover that the other unseaworthy vessel was the "Father."

This unseaworthy vessel was very much undermanned.




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Moreover, the captain was half asleep on the bridge. The result was that the vessel rolled and pitched heavily, heeling over on its broad beam-ends, only righting itself with great difficulty—the dazed captain not being aware that the friendly craft taking him in tow was the “Son.”

They struggled on, one helping and one retarding the other, until they entered Broomhey Lane. Here the facts vaguely presented themselves to Owen. Facts themselves seemed to be getting sober. He stood, deciding to cut the connection. But no, no, no. He gratefully thought of a cucumber-frame in the garden into which he could crash his charge, and so work a rough kind of justice that had been deferred from year to year. And yet—no. No! After that he should want to run, and as he had two sets of brains he seemed to have two sets of legs—one walking home, the other resolved to stand. Those resolved to stand were the stronger of the two and would betray him. “Another time; ah, ha! another time!” he mused in the true spirit of drunken melodrama.

And yet a sudden gush of tipsy pity overcame Owen's two sets of feelings. He thought of the stricken chairman, and wildly hugged his poor old dad, as if with two sets of arms. He was so tenderly touched by that contact as to be quite unable to resist making the embrace a still more comprehensive expression of his whole being by clinging to his dad with his legs as well; whereupon the father, thinking he had been waylaid by five or six highwaymen, hoarsely stuttered, “Murder! murder!”

“Murder? Murder?” To Owen's drink-dulled ear the word was as thick as a vocal fog; nevertheless it drummed and drummed like a far-off battle summons to passions. Intoxication returned in full force in another form. Rage itself seemed to spring alive from Owen's arms and legs, and tripped and whirled his father to the ground. He there attacked his victim as if con-



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scious of a revengeful viper in every finger-nail. Suddenly a glimmering of the horrible fate he was enacting passed through his mind. He moaned his penitence, and turned his attack into one more pitying embrace.

That was how father and son fell asleep in Broomhey Lane, a few hundred yards from home.

Mrs. Mowcroft and Sabina waited in the back-parlor until twelve o'clock. Momentarily in nervous expectation, they continued there until one. They now dreaded the sound of feet upon the path as much as they had longed for it. But there was nothing astir outside. Inside there was only the silent movement of their own sad glances—both resisting to confess that this, after all, was the most anxious double waiting they had ever passed through.

Mrs. Mowcroft at last yielded her shattered will to mutter in a half-dazed, broken-hearted way her racked wondering as to where father and son could possibly be. Were they together? If so, what had happened? Had their last great quarrel come to blows?

Like a clap of thunder in the quiet house they heard the pantry window opened and closed. They listened as if to thieves. They heard Owen's zigzag walk along a passage, and then his slow zigzag struggle up-stairs.

When Mrs. Mowcroft heard the click of his bedroom door bolt she sank her face into her hands, and her hands upon her knees, thankful that he was in the flesh, safe in the house in any form at all.

Sabina's relief expressed itself in quite another way. "He's not worth crying for, mother dear. Not worth it!" she said.

Mrs. Mowcroft, feeling the truth of this, wept the more.

In a little while the quivering, rattling sound of Mr. Mowcroft's latch-key trying to shoot the lock of the side door stopped Mrs. Mowcroft's sobs. Mother and daugh-



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ter listened to disaster in yet another shape, and with far worse brutish possibilities than in the case of Owen. Standing, ready for the crisis, they heard Mr. Mowcroft heavily struggle from the door—lumbering past their own back-parlor door to a table, from the table along the wall of the passage to the main hall, and down the hall to the dining-room.

He closed the room door upon himself, as if he never meant it to be opened again.


Mrs. Mowcroft fell upon Sabina's neck, weeping out her intense gratitude and dread.

Sabina's new spirit of revolt made her wish that some loaded weapon were within reach. She could have walked down the hall, entered the dining-room, and shot her father dead. Then she fell upon her mother's neck, penitent for the thought; and mother and daughter embraced each other the closer within the doom that held them both as one.

The clock struck two; but all except the clock was quiet. Nevertheless they still waited in the hope of hearing Mr. Mowcroft go safely up-stairs.

They waited until half-past two. After anxiously waiting ten minutes more, and ten minutes more again, they concluded that he had fortunately fallen asleep. They might venture to go. Carrying lighted candles, they very quietly opened the parlor door, passed on tiptoe into the hall, went down it, paused opposite the dining-room, and listened.

Providence itself seemed cruel to their ears. They might have been listening, not to the sleep of a man, but to the heavy sleep of a hog. They both shrank from the sound, Mrs. Mowcroft saddened, but Sabina under protest, and yet both grateful that he was there, safe in the custody of sleep. Whether like hog or like man, thought Sabina, what, what did it now matter? He had long since fouled every sweet ideal they had.



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Lowering the hall light, they went up-stairs. On the landing they kissed like the two last remnants of a household love, and went to their rooms.


Upon second thoughts Mrs. Mowcroft decided to take her irrepressible outbursts of grief to the dressing-room, in case Mr. Mowcroft should come up-stairs sobered and find her in tears. There she rested on the sofa in her clothes, ready for any fresh crisis that might happen.

There was no isolated fresh crisis ; but there was the continuously fresh one of momentary expectation in the dead of the night. The sound of even a wakened breeze at the window alarmed her. The silence itself rang with the mystic miniature floating bells of fate ; and her life lived breath by breath, throb by throb, in dread of a doom that overshadowed but did not come, and yet was coming all the time.

Sabina, only partly undressed, was wearied and yet sleepless, gloomy and fretful, and lounged in a half-sitting posture over her pillow. Though eager listening had become an automatic habit of hers each night for years, that night she listened as if for the first time in her life. She had a new, alert dread of hearing the dining-room door being opened, because a vision which she in vain tried to avoid would now and then force past her will and vividly reveal her father creeping up the stairs on hands and feet, entering Owen's room, and, in the dogged violence of drink, choking him to death. The vision showed her Owen dead—her father under arrest—his remorse—his trial—his sentence—his execution.

The vision only vanished when the startling fall of her tears upon the pillow sounded like the dripping of blood from some deed of her own unconsciously done.

Her tears gave way to a cynical and fiery protest. Why *should* her mother and she be crushed ?




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Her very passion was jealous of being curbed by two men who gave full license to their own. Why *should* she be a cooped-up creature, crushed, degraded, night after night, year after year? It was mere child's foolery of life to stay and endure. Far, far better would it be if she and her mother were dead, and under cold, wet clay. If only her poor, wearied mother were safely at rest beyond these horrors of life, she would let her father and Owen fight it out to the death. If only her poor mother were dead, she would make off and never go near the home of horrors and torments again.

Mr. Mowcroft partially awoke in his chair soon after four o'clock, clammy and chilled. But his clogged will could not lift his heavy eyelids, and he almost fell asleep again. He felt like cold mud might be said to feel at sundown when its warm dankness is beginning to be chilled. That kept him awake enough to make him conclude that he was not in bed. Was he still in Broomhey Lane grovelling with Owen? A discomforting, dull thudding of his sluggish conscience in regard to Owen roused him a little. He moaned. He bent bodily downward, gripping the back of his head with both hands, moaning deeper, thinking of Owen. He brooded over Owen's growing depravity, as a cloud might brood by means of its shadow over the dark heart of a wood which it is making darker by its thought.

He awoke still more. Consciousness brooded within him like a complex system of moral contrarities. The growing tendency of Owen to do as he himself had done, and was still doing, roused a righteous indignation. But it soon ceased to be strictly righteous, because it became savage, and he groaned himself almost fully awake, towards vengeance.

His trembling fist verily danced on his knees with moral wrath as he thought of Owen as the junior libertine and scamp of the Broomhey home; and yet at the



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same instant his closing eyes wept a morbid prayer of tears for the salvation of his son.

This was becoming a chronic moral mood with Mr. Mowcroft. He never desired Owen's temperance more than when he himself had passed helplessly beyond its bounds. He was always most virtuous when most in the thralls of vice. He was never better than when he was too bad to be good. It was, indeed, irritatingly contradictory even to himself when drunk, that he was always morally at his best when he was at his worst. But so it was. As sure as Mr. Mowcroft sank beyond a certain depth into drink, or drink rose to a certain blood-heat temperature in him, he began to be morbidly desperate about Owen's preservation from a similar doom. As a rule, his moral anxiety made him more immoral, for it gave him an excuse to sink deeper into the depths of his own slow death. It was so on this occasion. He could not resist. With an oath he struggled to the sideboard. The key was not in the lock as usual, and the door would not open. With a still greater oath his foot kicked through the mahogany panel, and his hand grasped at a decanter of brandy. He avenged himself for this obstruction by taking a double dose; and, not troubling to go to his chair, he sank at full length on the carpet where he was.

When the brandy had fired his moral sense to its highest consciousness, with the leg of a chair in his hand he swore that if Owen continued to give way—if he went wrong—if he also troubled his mother and Sabina—he would break every bone in his body! And on behalf of sobriety and virtue he took more brandy to swear himself into his moral compact the more.

And yet down in Mr. Mowcroft's drunken depths as he again lay stretched on the carpet, there was a grimly sober double pity—a pity for himself and Owen; a pity for that far-off younger self of the past, for himself, the



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weak son of a father of weakness and vice; a pity for himself, the doomed man, as he then floundered as if drowning in torments, wishing even with his intoxicated soul that he had died before he had become so helpless, degraded, and damned: damned in the scorching hell of his own being with his own father and himself—yes, and his own son Owen—as relentless devils and fiends making all life like living death, and threatening to make all death like dying life, which, nevertheless, could never die.

Towards torturing dreams of this—dreams that felt physical to him—he sank to the sleepless sleep of the broken heart and the drink-delirious brain.

Within three ticks of the mantel-piece clock he had killed Owen twice—squeezing his neck to the thinness of a chair-leg. When the hollow-toned clock slowly struck four, it was the prison-bell tolling eight, and Mr. Mowcroft fell through the trap-door of the scaffold to waken on the dining-room floor like a murderer escaped from hell, but mad.

A chair with the two front legs broken was across his chest. The two remaining legs were the prongs of Satan's fork trying to fling him back to the flames. With fiendish passion of torments he hurled the chair into a crystal-clustered chandelier—the whole cluster abruptly tinkling like fairy bells. To him they were the far-off bells of heaven ringing a quick, unanimous alarm. He moaned; he whined. The bells of heaven had ceased. He had fallen again through the scaffold trap-door, through the lowest pit to the private black hole of Satan himself. One-legged elfish fiends, no bigger than lucifer-matches, danced about him, each like a head on a stilt, and the head blue with sulphurous flame. In a trice they sprang so tall that their heads were stars under the smoky floor of heaven. Lo, they were now dancing on their flaming heads, brushing his frame like silent, fiery



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wisps. One imp lit his heart. His heart hung in him as a red-hot lamp lit with inflammable blood, overflowing with explosive drops and splashes of fire. But he was a vital and immortal fire that could not consume and could not be quenched. So was his son Owen—flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone, that could not be burned. Oh, he was doubly damned. He would kill Owen out of his sight! He rose—and fell heavily to his torments again. But he would kill Owen out of his sight! Surely souls killed in hell went up to heaven if only to be pitied by God? With the strength of exasperation he rose.

Owen was immediately overhead, half dressed upon the floor of his room—a sad, gruesome object of the lowest earth, and yet with dreams of delirium that lifted him into heaven. He was among the blessed. Cloudlands of aërial orchestras of St. Cecilians were playing on organs no larger than his hand; they were playing a sweet symphony of his own—“Triumph over Sin”; while on organs as vast as cathedrals, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Bach were playing a grand, united, thundering fugue of his—“Triumph over Death and Hell.” He heard King David singing a psalm of praise, playing a harp, whose travelling echoes played other harps hanging on the air into phantom unison. He heard Mary singing “My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit doth rejoice.” Suddenly the whole of heaven became one vast instrument sweetly attuned to Mary’s song by the gentlest touch. Angels walking, unconsciously played it with their feet. Angels by merely standing played contributing harmonies out of the sacred places where they stood. Angels talking, gave forth music like pellucid pipes. Even angels embracing played music out of the bodies and arms of each other. But soon, far, far away, with a painful thrill, reminiscent of earth rather than of heaven, he abruptly heard some angel of the



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Lord rehearsing the trumpet-call for the last day. All music ceased. Heaven as heaven stopped. The trumpet-call itself ceased, and all silence enveloped him like a universe struck dumb—animate without voice; inanimate without sound.

Within that silence he clearly heard the travelling drunken moan of Noah warning the world of wine. That very hour he would descend to earth and save at least one grovelling father from the horrors of his life. If he had to save him by bearing the pangs of earthly life again, descend and save him he would.

Enraptured by his heavenly mission, Owen left the room, and yet, with a pathetic, intuitive utility of earth, he carried a light. He went down-stairs. At the foot of the stairs he and his father met. The delirious father, seeing the light magnified into dazzling suns, thought that this was Almighty God descending from heaven into hell—and like a beast he sprang upon Him to kill even God, and so free the whole world from the burden of life.

Owen, with his father's hand upon his throat, became a wild son of earth again, and the mad father, at the touch of his son's flesh, became infuriated with the old paternal wrath. They fell to the hall floor, each fighting for the life of the other, each fiendishly struggling to grip the other into death, cursing and groaning in the strife.

Down the stairs came Mrs. Mowcroft, Sabina, and Ann Jane Jones, all with the most passionate appeals, vigorously embracing the two blaspheming beings as they fought. But they were interlocked, grip within grip, as if two pythons had arms and legs. They tumbled and rolled in deadly struggle, leaving the three women as helpless as three blades of grass when two monsters of the forest are at war, the three women, nevertheless, following them, struggling with them, appealing to them,



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praying to heaven—Ann Jane Jones at the same time thrusting all the old walking-sticks between them to encumber their grips.


Mr. Mowcroft, as with the concentrated energy of a passionate bull, managed to rise ; but Owen, seizing him, rose also. They fell against the wall, rebounding in their increased struggle from wall to wall, crashing a table, upsetting the hall stand, and banging with their united force against the disused front door, so that the bust of Milton in the fan-light fell with a crash, the three women again bearing great lunges of brute force in their hysterical efforts to separate them. But in vain. The grips were like the grips of tree roots.

Utterly powerless, Mrs. Mowcroft and Sabina ran from the house by the side-door for help. Ann Jane Jones then mounted the hall chair to reach their necks and even their hair in the hope of doing something ; but a twist and rebound from the two men hurled her and the chair over. Ann Jane then took the liberty of trying to strike her two masters asunder with the hall chair, even forcing the legs of the chair between them as a stockade. But it was like stockading two rocks.

Passion now took possession of Ann Jane. Rushing down the hall to the kitchen she put a bucket under the tap, muttering to keep up her patience while the water ran at its fullest force, "If it's drink that has cursed you, it may be drink that will cure you."

She heard Owen hoarsely crying, "Murder ! Murder !" and, putting a second bucket under the tap, Ann Jane ran with the first, and dashed all the water full into Mr. Mowcroft's face.

Pausing no more than to see a gratifying gasp, she rushed for the second bucket, fortunately almost full. That also, but with wilder force, she dashed into the panting face of Mr. Mowcroft ; running without a pause for the third supply, and muttering as she went, "If you've



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a fiend's fire in you, my man, I'll put it out! And take no human credit for it either, you sinner, for it's no less than the Lord's own doings is this. I can feel it! I can see it! Thank God for water!" she said, running with another charge.

But it was not required, for Owen was struggling down the side passage, and Mr. Mowcroft was in a helpless heap in the corner against the front door, panting more like a stranded red-and-blue monster of the deep than a man.

When Mrs. Mowcroft returned with a neighbor she found Ann Jane Jones briskly rubbing her master's head with a towel, and on the hall chair the brush and comb were ready to complete her task.

CHAPTER XI

PROGRESS AT HOME AND ABROAD

ONE day at Liverpool Ark received a letter from Meg, saying that there were now eight clocks on the wall and four watches, and that his mother was very ill.

He reached home the following evening. It was quite correct about the watches and clocks. His mother, however, was perfectly well—laughing—attending to two lodgers—Tom the fair collier, and Tim the dark baker, both looking much more at home than Ark himself could be.

Ark strongly disliked this humiliating idea of lodgers; but they were in possession, and what could he do?

But the most significant fact was that Meg had joined the church choir, and was learning the fiddle—as she was soon eager to show with the instrument under her chin.


“The church organist is the *bow*,” said Tom, the fair young collier.

“Aye—the church organist *is* the bow,” echoed Tim, the dark young baker, in precisely the same strain.

Meg tittered as she was trying hard to strike a chord. The result was that the chord trembled to pieces under her bow, and finished with a whine.

This whine, however, was a most appropriate accompaniment for the inharmonious emotion that broke into a thousand pieces in Ark. Meg had developed indeed!

Bracing herself up with great effort, Meg played as



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much as she knew of a limited version of "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

She played the few bars again. With that persistent generosity of the learner who is gratefully mastering the first difficulties as if they were the very last, she played her tremulous version of "The Girl I Left Behind Me" yet again, and with more command.

Black Tim slyly glanced at Ark, seeking signs of his appreciation. He saw Ark staring at the floor, and Ark did not seem to be listening.

Fair Tom also glanced at Ark for signs. But Ark was gazing down with more intensity than before.

Meg, with a downward sweep of her bow, finished her very best rendering of the lively tune, and with her full cheeks aglow and her eyes glistening with nervous light she looked with almost impatient expectation for Ark's delight.

But he had such a downcast, moody look after all her feverish effort that she cast the fiddle away, sat beside him, clasped his neck with the old girlishness of style but a greater strength of body and arm, and shook his face into a livelier look of admiration.

Fair Tom the collier tittered at the inspiring sight, but with a certain amount of blushing masculine shame, which on some such occasions is more keen than the shame feminine.

Dark Tom the baker tittered to precisely the same degree of sound, but his flush was deeper in color.

Meg was not fully satisfied with Ark's response, and took a handful of his long black hair above the arched brow, saying :

"I'll screw this up like a string and play on it if you don't look more pleased!" She reached the bow, saying, "See!" and with splendid mockery from her distended throat she affected to scrape bass notes from his stretched lock of hair. By this means she played his face into a

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sudden smile. She played until he laughed. Then she hugged him so much more decisively than before that Tom, with unconscious seriousness of shame, murmured, "Um!"

"Um!" murmured Tim a little more consciously; and the warm round kitchen seemed haunted by the delicacy of the situation.

But while the three abashed males were getting courage into their eyes to glance at anything but their own self-consciousness, Meg took up the fiddle and played her amateurish perversion of "Sally in our Alley."

Meg played what she knew of this touchingly. Indeed, she played an earnest expression of real feeling into Tom's eyes—and, of course, into Tim's also.

Ark's eyes expressed feeling more subtle than Tim's and deeper than Tom's. Delights fought with doubts; and doubts won. He was puzzled with Meg and her musical turn.

In came Rollie Rondle, like a round-faced, clean-shaven, close-cropped, low comedian. Seeing Meg, Tom, and Tim, Rollie's blue eyes twinkled with something of the surprising brightness of the first stars of night. He failed to see Ark sitting near the bench at the window.

"Hullo, mates!" he called. "Eating again!" His greeting to Meg was expressed by his arm going around her waist. She coquettishly twisted away. He quite as coquettishly caught her again.

Holding her, he saw Ark.

"What! Ark, lad? Never! Back? How art a? See here!" and he illustrated how he could make Meg writhe with his "patent kind of tickling under the roof of the arm."

"Have you tramped yourself right through your soles and heels, Ark? You look it. Hold still, lass. What d'you think, Ark, of Tom and Tim, your two cousins-in-law-brothers-and-uncles-in-one, roosting here under your own roof?"

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Tom and Tim chuckled. In their shame they began to eat faster.

"Rare fellows for meat-tea feasting, these two! Look at 'em! *They're* the lads for destruction. I don't know how your mother stands it at only three shillin' a week each, or four-and-six the two! And Saturday-night soap and Sunday-morning blacking in the bargain as well. Four-and-six the two!"

"Oh!" called Tom.

"Ho!" followed Tim.

"Three times that," said Tom to Ark.

"Aye, three times more to that," answered his echo.

"Do you see Meg bigger?" Rollie asked Ark. Under an especially tickling squeeze, Meg screamed. She tried to get away, but failed; though failure seemed to be even more gratifying than success would have been.

"Did you come across such a thing as a kissing-fight in your travels in foreign parts, Ark?" asked Rollie, invitingly tugging Meg for combat.

Meg protested with a smack on the plump cheek of irrepressible Rollie. Ark was more relieved than if he had given the smack himself.

Then she flushed in very deep, radiant shame of her act. By way of penitence she glanced at Rollie. Then she laughed in acknowledgment of many such fights in the past that were much too ecstatic to forget.

Ark was more keenly hurt than ever.

"It's a new game I've invented, my very own self, Ark. That is, with the help of Meg here; for who ever heard of a fellow fightin' hissen, to say nought of the emptiness of kissin' yoursen? I'll tell you the rules of the ring."

"You needn't, Rollie," murmured Ark. "It's of no—"

"Yea, it is. Learn it. You'll find it handy. If you manage to kiss your lass once—an' it takes some managing, I can tell thee, with Meg—though the managing is sometimes the kissiest part o' the fun—"

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Ark impatiently shuffled.

"If you manage it once, as I say, she has to kiss you twice. If you manage two, she has to give four. If three, she has to give six. So that instead o' *saying* the multiplication-table, Ark, you *kiss* it! See?"

"It's compound multiplication sometimes," said Tom.

"Aye—double compound," added Tim.

"And vulgar fractions, I should think," muttered Ark.

"Should we show thee?" called Rollie, merely to enjoy Meg's scuffle of protest already begun, which would lead to showing, nevertheless.

"Hey, Rollie, lad," said Ark, "I've something else to think on but such gid-gaddin' as that. Something else to think on, lad. Sit down a bit. Do. And you, Meg."

Rollie asked, "What's up? Nay, what's down with you, Ark?"

"Nought."

"Fagged?"

"Just a bit."

Meg went up-stairs.

"You look clemm'd, to *me*," said Rollie. "And you should see these two Tom-and-Tim cronies jaunting—step by step, swing by swing. They even wink by wink, and gape by gape. I've seen 'em! But Tim's gape, like his wink, is a bit bigger nor Tom's, and shows his white teeth aback of his black mustache as if he's proud on 'em."

"List to Rollie!"

"Aye, list to Rollie!"

"Did you hear a Tom-and-Tim echo of 'List to Rollie' just then, Ark?"

"I've heard nought but you, Rollie, since you came in."

"And why not?—Hey, mother?" called Rollie to Margit, who was entering by the front door.

"Why not what, Rollie, lad?"

"Why not Tom and Tim coort the self-same lass? One

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for one cheek, t'other for t'other. One for top lip, one for the low, and her pretty nose between 'em."

"They may coort a cow-post so long as they keep their Rollie-Rondle fooling outside of this. Do have a cup o' tea, Ark, lad! You're making me miserly miserable."

Ark shook his head.

"Come! You look stark wanting—fair famished."

"Just a drink then—where I sit—nought to eat."

"All right, son. . . . Where's Meg?"

"I think she flew, flared up the flue, Margit," answered Rollie. "She were fiddling a hymn tune here just now, an' th' devil were so surprised that he nipped her up."

"That's enough o' that!" said Margit. "If you must clown it a bit keep yourself to your own kin, an' not to Owd Nick and *his* kind."

"In speaking of Owd Nick, I think Rollie was keepin' very close to his own kind!" cried Tom.

"Aye, aye," laughed Tim. "He was so."

"If there is anywhere a nephew of Owd Nick," explained Tom, "on this here wide earth—"

"It's Rollie Rondle!" completed Tim.

In acceptance of this compliment Rollie twitched his trousers above his fat ankles and rattled a quick, clanging clog-dance near the arc of the central old millstone.

While Tom and Tim were laughing at Rollie's over-elaborate triple break-down, Ark moodily crossed the round kitchen as if crossing some old worn-out hemisphere of his past, and went up-stairs.

He closed the door of his room, which was like a segment of a circle with a window in the arc. "Is she bigger, indeed!" he repeated from Rollie in his thought. Aye, the young woman was now in her as clearly as a hand in a tight kid-glove. "Meg, Meg, Meg!" he mutely sighed, mounting a chair to lean out of the window for a cooling waft of air. He gazed over the church—over to the narrow Blue Beck—beyond it to the more distant



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Silver Streak—and far away over the chimney-columned dale, where the sinking sunlight and the smoke were in silent combat.

Now and then he drew in his head to listen if Meg were still above. She occasionally crossed the floor. Then she settled for some time immediately above him. He could hear the thin, hard board creak now and then. He bit his lip, thinking. He surmised that she was dressing her hair. For whom? Had any lass ever put comb through her hair for him? Nay.

He looked out of the window again. In the churchyard he noticed four choir youths sitting on a grassy spot between two graves. Not far off were seven rather dressy girls walking from grave to grave. Now and then the girls talked loudly and glanced expectantly at the youths.

But the youths ignored all this. They simply played stick-knife in the sod, laughing at their game. This humiliating coquetry of the girls keenly annoyed Ark. He was jealous on their own behalf as girls. The dead indifference of the youths to the advertising efforts increased his sorrow that such efforts should be made at all. A wild sadness roused him. He resolved to break the situation up. Reaching a catapult of his own make in earlier days, he put in a cherry-stone, centred his aim upon a youth, and fired. He so smartly hit the tightened flank that the youth rolled over with a yell. With profound insight the youth looked towards the girls. The girls innocently laughed. He rose, ran towards them, singled one out, and thumped her until she fell over a grave mound like a doll.

Down Ark went. Catching the youth by the jacket collar he made him describe a rotating fall to the earth. Ark then fully explained the moral of the act. "And now," he added, "if you like, smart un, thump me; but keep your hands off girls! And what do you, poor, cheap,

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giddy lasses, come gigglin', wrigglin', and starin' round about the lads for? They're not worth it. You let the lads seek you, you seven young sillies! I'm surprised at ye!"

Off he went up to his room again.

As he reclined out of his window Meg called from the attic window above:

"Why did you do that, Ark?"

Looking up he saw the oval of Meg's face like a blending of olive and coral backed by the round black aureole of a wide hat with scarlet strings. Her question became lost to Ark in her beauty. His intended answer lost itself in her beauty as well. He simply gazed.

"New last week!" she called with insight. "Manchester! For Sundays and practice nights! I put the feather in myself!—out of the old hat. What time is it?"

This so confounded Ark that while taking out his watch he felt that Meg was more than one personality now. Indeed, everything seemed plural. Hats! Feathers! Ribbons! Fiddles! Choirs! What, what in the world would come next?

"What time *was* it, Ark?"

"Oh, aye, I really didn't look," he muttered, again taking out his watch. "It's half-past seven, Meg." She jerked away.

A moment later, however, Ark felt something drop on his head. He looked up and saw the whites of her eyes and the white of her teeth flash in the unity of merriment. She took Ark's nose by surprise with another shot.

"Here! Catch!"—and he caught.

With the most ecstatic impatience she waited for Ark to read whatever words chanced to be on the "Sweet-hearing sweet."

Ark read, "MEET ME TO-NIGHT." He was stung

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by her growth. She had developed even into this! He looked up, struggling to seem pleased. She tittered at his mystification and called :

“ Catch again !”

Ark missed that one. Meg at once followed it with another. On that one Ark read, “ YOU MAY IF YOU LIKE.”

Ark looked up even more mystified ; and Meg, with a ringing laugh, withdrew.

With a great effort he called, “ What made you join the choir, Meg ?”

From the inside of her room the answer came, “ Oh—eh—nothing !”

Withdrawing into his room, Ark heard her hastening across the floor and descending the attic stairs. Then he looked out of his window to be ready to see her cross to the church.

He saw, instead, a smart young fellow of about twenty-eight, with a conspicuous fair mustache, passing through the church-yard and glancing at the house door ; then with a quick, sly sweep of his eye up to the garret window. He entered the church porch.

Meg then crossed Millgate Lane for the church-yard. At the church porch she turned to look up at Ark. She waved her hand and went in before Ark had time to wave back. To him it was like a picture called “ Farewell ” he had seen on his travels.

He gazed across the dale, murmuring in thought without words, “ She’s now like to a colt I couldn’t catch with my hat o’erbrimming with corn. I wonder if I had stayed at home—?”

He heard the organ. He wanted to listen, but the dulling curiosity set going by the flippant words on the two sweets he had caught urged him to go down for the sweet he had missed. He found it near the front doorstep. Up-stairs he read, “ DO YOU WANT A SWEET-



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HEART?" He closed his fist on the question and hit the window-ledge with such force that the sweet broke into pieces.

He flung the fragments to the air and lounged upon the ledge. He heard the organ giving forth exultant sounds as of pipes dancing to their own tunes. Indeed, the reverberating rapture seemed to shake the church-tower. The reverberation crossed the road and thrilled Ark as if the organist's invisible hands were playing a fugue upon Ark's strained nerves.

Suddenly the sound of the choir, unaccompanied by the organ, reached him, as if the church were a great vocal musical box emitting sweet tones attuned to the soft and mellow stained-glass windows lit by the setting sun—the bass voices to the dark-browns, the tenors to the points of purple, the boy trebles to the scarlets and reds, and the girls to the yellows and pinks.

Ark's touched hearing went hunting. He tried to single Meg's voice from the total harmony. But the organ began to play; the organ, indeed, seemed to envelop all thought of her in its increasing volume, and he unconsciously muttered:

"Sweetheart? By the Lord, for her own sake Meg had better take care! She had better take care for ours as well! I'm—what I am; but I'm no fool."

Up Millgate Lane walked the stalwart new curate, twirling his heavy stick. He crossed the church-yard, still twirling his blackthorn. Ark fancied that the curate entered the porch as if he wanted to see the organist. "Very likely; and a queer fellow for a church organist they have!"

Long sunset beams were soon shot horizontally from the west up the wide dale, glistening on factory windows, tinting pit chimneys, illuminating smoke and steam into golden dragons and silvern serpentine forms, streaming through the stained windows of the church like flame



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through flame, and making the grave-stones look as if lit with resurrection light.

Into some of those moving beams walked the members of the choir. The practice was over. But the organist was still playing his instrument. Out of the sunlit porch came the curate and Meg. The curate, as if asking a question, bent towards her, looking aslant into her resisting face, also aslant.

Ark was eagerly reading every act as if those two lives were two open pages. He saw Meg's head shake—rather irresolutely, he thought. The curate actually put his arm through hers and stood, causing her to stand. He thus questioned her again. She repeatedly shook her head, and, as if not satisfied, he walked her along the church-yard path.

"Something's wrong," mused Ark. "She looks it. He's giving advice. Bravo! I wish I had half his pluck. Hullo? Laughing? The two on 'em. His laugh's all right; her's is a bit of a make-believe. Hey, Meg, Meg! laugh the truth, lass, and God love thee. Ah! She wants to wriggle away. I thought it would come to that."

By a pettish twist Meg left the curate standing, the more conspicuous in his defeat.

Ark was sorry for him, and withdrew a pace or two to avoid being seen. But he mounted a chair in the middle of the room.

The curate was looking towards Meg, and twirling his stick in the spirit that a cat twirls its tail. She was crossing the little-used stone stile in the church-yard wall away from Millgate Lane, as if the quicker out of reach the better for her.

Ark was soon in the church-yard speaking for the first time to the new curate.

"I'm sorry she didn't behave, mister. Were you wiggin' her?"

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"No, no, no!"

"Much of it, I know, wouldn't do."

"I was only trying to persuade her."

"It's what I've fancied myself trying to do; but—"

"*You* ought to manage it. I might have thought of that. You're Ark? You've been away? She's continually talked of Ark. Ark was this; Ark was that; Ark, Ark was everything."

"And yet nothing much, you see, in the end."

"It's only that I think of reviving one of the old Lancashire wake-songs—"

"Aye? Good! Hey, my poor father—"

"A weaver and his wife, you know, ride in a cart, and while spinning they tell each other their faults."

"And make it up the better! My father knew it. And you want Meg to be the wife?"

"I do."

"I'd be the husband myself! I half know the rhyme:

"'It's Millgit wakes, an' wey're comin to town
To tell yo' o' som'thin' o' great renown,
An' if this owd jade 'ull lem mi begin,
Aw'll show yo'—'"

"Well done! But our organist is to be the weaver."

"O-h? Ho, ho. Aye? Um—"

"He knows the—"

"There's Meg!—as straight into the house as a swift!"

"Will you persuade her?"

Ark unconsciously shook his head.

"Now I have to persuade—you!"

"It's persuading myself, mister. But I'll see. I'll see."

"Do your best. It's a good old-fashioned idea. Good-night. Try!"

Ark's interview had been seen by Margit. When Ark explained, she said:



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“Do nothin’ o’ the sort. Wakes are wakes. Let ‘em sleep. They may begin at the church, but they’ll end in Mill Stones Inn. The lass wants no Christmas, Whitsun, or Wakes song to liven *her* up. She’s too much o’ the cricket already; and a cricket not o’er fond of the hearth either; and a cricket anywhere but on the hearth is queerish queer. It isn’t luck, at any rate. Do nothin’; say nothin’.”

“Where is she?”

“She came in by the front. She went up-stairs. She came down. She slithered through that back door like a thief. I called her; she mocked that she didn’t hear; but the wag on her told me she did. I think she’s a bit tossier in th’ head since you’ve come back, Ark. Have you spoken rough about ought?”

“Hardly a word—rough or smooth.”

“Maybe it’s because o’ that. You don’t seem as easy with her, lad. Don’t heed Tom an’ Tim being here. Their week’s money is well worth having; but if clocking comes back again, they can mark time out o’ this. But they’re two decent lads. I never did see quieter. If you do for the one you do for the two.”

“It’s awkward with them here,” murmured Ark. “I wish I could mend it. By my stars, I do!”

“I know you do, lad. But let’s have no more tramping. Thee stick home.”

“And stick i’ the mud—”

“If you like to make it mud. Better stick here than stick somewhere else.”

“I doubt it. I wish I’d stayed in Leeds, or Preston, or Liverpool. Almost, I do.”

“Gettin’ two weeks’ work out o’ nine! Settle down. Get at you clocks.”

A blackness that was presageful of tears shadowed the under part of Ark’s eyes. He sat silent. His pained face appeared representative of passions within that were



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vaster, greater, nobler than his frame and limbs; and yet passions which he knew were bound to that crude form — bound by it, bound in it — forever part of it: that stunted form daily defining the little world in which he should live. Feeling keenly that his powers were growing obsolete, his influences waning, and that his affections were without exercise to the full, he passionately cried, "I'll not be bound back like this in Brink-o'-Dale!"

"I'll say the same as I've said many a time to thy father: put on th' apron, sit at th' bench, and keep your own mind inside your own head in your own home."

He slowly muttered, "Keeping—is—keeping." Then he impatiently demanded, "Is Meg always out this late, now?"

"No. But she won't take heats. I've tried 'em. She boils o'er. So keep cool when she does come."

"Who's *in* a heat!" he perversely cried in pain.

"Husht! Damp thy fire! She's here!"



CHAPTER XII

THE DISCOVERED CHORD

It was a false alarm. Meg was not at the door. She was in the church. She was standing near the organ seat, very much aglow within the yellow halo of the light from the one gas pillar which Owen Mowcroft had left in for his usual recital.

On these occasions, sometimes a few of the members of the choir stayed, and sometimes the curate looked in for an hour of Handel or Bach. But this night the entire audience consisted of the enthusiastic blind blower at the back, Owen Mowcroft and Meg in front, and a sparrow in the dark Beyond of the north gallery—a bird which during the pauses of the organ sometimes chirped an unaccompanied solo for a crowded audience of shadows sitting moodily enrapt in every pew, within every window, and along every beam.

Owen had been pleasantly improvising at the organ for some time.

“Are you listening?” he asked Meg, without turning his head as he mentally constructed his theme. “I’ll ask you to give your idea of what it is, you know,” he added, smiling, using the pedals with deft stealthiness of touch, as if the elves of sound would vanish if they heard the commonplace contact of leather and wood. He was a delicate player, and airily fingered the keys as if with feelings rather than hands. He was also a player of power, and soon, shooting out nearly all the stops, he



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made the very panels of the organ-case buzz with a climax of thunderous sounds.

These abruptly rippled themselves into quieter cloudlands of far-off melody; and at last they quivered as if trying to express something of the spectral music of a distant star audible only in reverie.

"Now then? What's your version of that?"

Meg, in a tremulous glow of emotion, ventured, "The Last Day?"

"No," he gently laughed, once more amused with the variable suggestiveness of music and of Meg's erratic fancy. "No. Try again."


Meg shook her head, the blush within her dusky splendor of natural color deepening, like an orange seen through port wine. She was afraid to guess. "What was it?" she asked, her brown eyes with their nervous light avoiding his. He answered:

"'And God said, Let there be light. And there was light.' Now listen; try again with this."

With only his right hand he began upon ethereal, tremulous notes, as if a will-o'-the-wisp were piping a long clear reed on a frosty, moonlit night. His left hand soon wrought in an occasional depth—as of shadowy sedges standing black in the air, but reflected blue in the pool by the silvering moon. Then the pedals little by little added still more depth—darker depth—black depth—the depth of mountains with dithering ground-thunder in their hollow places.

Withdrawing his hands and feet, he called, "What was—that? No! Wait," he cried, as if in pain, ruffling his fair curls, jerking out stops, vigorously plying both hands to the keys as if each finger were a little fist for a separate passion; and toeing and heeling the pedals with vehement rapidity of kicks.

Away up the arches there were continuous reanswering volleys from the musical artillery of echoes. With lips



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firmly closed he breathed heavily through his nostrils, and to get at closer quarters with the wild clash of piled-up chords he jerked forward on his seat, puckered his brows, bit his lip, and even moaned, gratified as he vigorously set both hands and both feet to sustain the most inharmonious combination of all that the diabolical discord of his own rage could express. Nay, he pressed down his hands and feet as if upon some half-visible dragon of sound, some frenzied fiend of music called from the depths of existence by him, and turning mad with its partial freedom from material thrall—a fiend which, if he did not torture, exhaust, and kill, would rise above him, about him, torture and exhaust him; he and it mad, forever fighting, without the possibility of release by death. Lo, more stops sprang out, and as if a thundering cliff of squealing sea-gulls and their young had fallen at a bound into a roaring sea, his impetuous fingers fell upon the black and white breakers of the two key-boards and thundered out as with hollow sea caves of bass tones, and made the higher registers spurt as with the very spray of sound. He stopped, exhausted. Without looking at Meg, he asked:

“What was—that?”

Meg shook her head, more afraid than before of her idea being wrong, for he had played so well.

“Try.”

“No.”

“You must.”

“‘Red Riding Hood and the Wolf’?”

“No.”

“‘Then Beauty and the Beast’? It’s one or the other!”

“Not fairy tales at all,” he answered moodily, interlocking his fingers and pressing them between his knees as he looked down. “Something real. Too real.”

Trying to be indifferent to his own grim thoughts, he



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with his lips imitated the sound of water bubbling out of a bottle, and awaited her further attempt.

Meg, unknown to him, was trying to interpret the playing by his troubled manner, noting with pain the deathly reaction of paleness after the mental and physical glow.

Anxious to pay his cleverness the due of a correct version, Meg forced her thoughts so much that she even turned away, and round again. He trifled with the pedals with his toes. Half consciously he thus produced, as if from the earth itself, a low, weird accompaniment to his deeper mood.

Meg called with a quivering voice, "I know!"

"Well?" he asked, still playing.

"Something about—home?"

He very slowly nodded, and stopped playing.

"But you made *him* sound terrible. If it was your father."

He shook his head almost derisively, implying, "Not terrible enough; not half terrible enough!"

Turning his pale face and blue eyes upon her, he said, with quivering lip, "You don't know; you don't know," and stopped, as if this were the inadequate vocal prelude to a sorrow which could only be known in the profounder silence of fact.

In place of words upon his parted, faltering lips, the horrors within his silence sent a gleam of resisted tears to his eyes.

Then, like a bird, there flew out of her full woman's soul into her girlish heart a thrilling flutter of ideal pity. As if her feverish hand were one of the burning outer reaches of that pity, knowing and yet not knowing what she did, Meg placed it upon his knee, and her thoughts whirled round, her feelings beat to and fro, her whole being rose and fell in pleasure and pain.

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Here was a life, a clever life, a tender life, set to the most wonderful and beautiful music, and yet to the ugliest grief all her experience had ever known. In sorrow she bent her head, fighting with tears which were threatening, it now seemed to her, to childishly confess too much. Only for his hold upon her hand she would have turned away.

He felt this to be so. But thought, with a shock, held him up to himself. What was he doing? What, further, was he going to do? Thought led to feelings. Feelings swept back to thought again. For her sake he held himself in check. With only a light pat of acknowledgment of her sympathy upon her arm, he extended his hands to the keys and played.

Meg withdrew her hand from his knee, and felt as if set free with something new about her life.

He glided into a strange effect, produced by playing upon the black keys alone. It was a plaintive, whining, half-expressed emotion. Those sounds in the minor key seemed to speak of their under-developed existence, as little, premature creatures of a musical life, weary of being minor, tired of an inadequate life of half-tone, half-dumbly yearning through their limitation of speech to become the more self-gratifying completeness of a major note.

"Now then, guess that?" he called.

"Yourself. I *think*."


He muttered, "My sister."

"Then I'm sorry for her as well. More sorry for her—because you could leave."

"Aye, and will!" he answered, passionately, gazing at the keys as if his mind were still playing.

"Hi, hi," he sighed, moodily. "You sit up here and try." He made room for her on his right, beckoning with his hand.

Meg rapidly shook her head as at a situation too new.



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Blushing, she pursed her lips into a pronounced expression of utter incapacity to even think how to play such a complicated, big thing as a church organ.

"Come. Try. I don't mean playing—fancy-work, improvising, as we call it—anything."

"I can't."

"You can. I know you can. It's a mistake to suppose that *everybody* wants 'music' for music. Some people *are* music. Come. Let me see if I can read what you'll play. Anything will do. Just think, and do the thought."

Meg tittered a pleasant fancy or two nearer the idea.

"Do."

Her limbs trembled with the downward rushing sensations of a new existence fully before her.

"I'll show you."

Her eyes suddenly seemed jewelled with burnished brown gems. They sparkled gleams of half-tearful anticipation as she moved nearer.

"That's right!"

Her lips relaxed into a smile, showing her teeth like the regular double rows of white keys of an elfin organ, as she coyly advanced.

"Take off this big hat," he said, with his light, friendly hand on the brim. She freed the strings, and put the hat on a choir seat.

"Now," he resumed, pleasantly, as she sat on his right, "just put your hands on the keys—so. Wait a bit! Now all you have to do is to fancy that you're driving a coach with ten horses, a horse to each finger and thumb—and play. Play anything, anyhow. Just drive ahead, over rough road and smooth, up hill and down, and I'll follow in, driving abreast. If you gallop, I'll gallop. If you trot, I'll trot. If you take fright and run away, I'll take fright and run away. Now! Begin. Both

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hands ; *ten* horses, you know. Start. I'll lead off, then. Now !"

He made a purely formal start, holding in, allowing Meg's hap-hazard theme to become the one directing his. After a while she gained self-command enough to let her fancy freely have her fingers. He lightly pranced abreast with a flowing, suggestive accompaniment instantaneously invented, as he alertly read the fingers of her right hand just as if they were notes, as they descended upon the keys.

In the main the result was as if the five horses on Meg's right hand wanted to run away and couldn't, and as if the five on her left wouldn't run away if they could. But Owen Mowcroft's spanking, well-bred steeds subdued themselves with the proud clanking of bits and the crowding of fidgety, fastidious trottings into the confined pace and space of a well-curbed walk.

He could feel that Meg was too nervous to fully carry out his idea to do herself justice, or even to feel at ease. For her sake he called, as he continued to play, "Well done! You rest, now. Don't get down. It's all right ; you're not in the way," and Meg, still sitting, reclined with great relief against the choir partition, tingling with the fresh effects of a new experience so much upon her that the organ now seemed to be really playing her through the keys of her trembling fingertips.


The organist now deserted the personal confessions of improvising and sought relief in the musical reveries of others by linking exquisite strains of what to him was impersonal and abstract spiritual tenderness, from a Mozart Mass with reverential interludes, from a Haydn Oratorio, and pellucid flutings of pastoral reveries from some symphony remote in his own dreaming rather than in the creation of anybody else. He played on, and still on, interweaving the known with the unknown—



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a great masterpiece of familiar harmony with his amateur's searching for melody never before heard or expressed; holding communion with the mystic currents and undercurrents of remote regions of rapture brought near by sound: rippling variable, intricate rhythms of unspeakable solace as in musical soliloquy; striking surprise thrills of harmonic delight; revelling in the impenetrable mystery of any single or combined sound, and in the mystery of all sound whatsoever. The harmonies woven fresh out of his entranced fancy were to him as ideals made real in a new heaven and earth as yet invisible, but close to the touch of his hand; while all the dimmed realities of the world seemed but the obsolete fabrics out of which the ideals had been evolved—perfection from imperfection, beauty from ugliness, love from hate, right from wrong.

Meg's own emotion was to herself an ideal feeling at last made real by being made clear. Her material person felt to her like the mere human shell that held a murmur of the music of the great universe. The music, indeed, might have become transformed into an atmosphere of new warm odors from unknown realms of balmy night, she was so enveloped in blissful sensation away from her cruder being of common day. The airiest lyrical strains seemed to have loosened her straying golden-brown skeins of hair. Some melody in the minor key appeared to have become tearful gleams in her otherwise enraptured eyes. Two bars of rich, ardent harmony had apparently reddened her lips and struck them apart; while her throat quivered tremulously, as if low throbbing sweet notes were imprisoned in a silence beyond escape. The tenderness of music had entered into her tenderness and doubled it. Compassionate emotion itself now seemed not so much individual—her own—as the emotion of all life, of all love, of the whole world, of the universe itself; and yet it brought all thought to a



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point upon him. Whatever speech might shrink to say, there was a silent betrothal of her pity with his grief, as sacred as life. Whatever action might fail to do, there was in her an unobtrusive surrender of the sympathizing spirit; a mute consecration of the compassionate soul—that sacred marriage, indeed, which is unconsciously self-solemnized in the holy of holies of a maiden's heart far in advance of any outward event, when the true inner woman is fully touched to the fine, free issue of pity.

Oh, if this were pity, give her a life of it! A whole heaven and earth of it for him! And she would still have willingness and feeling to' spare for all sorrowing creatures yet unknown to her. Yes, and for those known to her; for Ark, Rollie, Tom, and Tim, Margit, Mrs. Dootson—even Sally Dootson—everybody—everything! For his music was not music only, just then; it was devotion, it was worship of the universe, a lifting of the spirit, a nearness to love; yes, a nearness to God.

For the final appeasing of his own thoughts for the night, Owen Mowcroft with supreme effort inspired the instrument as it were to joyously break forth with Haydn's "The Heavens are Telling," while he sang with full, deep, revelling bass, "The wonder of His work displays the firmament."

Meg hid her face in a tremor of love's adoration. Her heart beat as with diapason thuds. Her nerves tingled with trembling exultations of strained delight—and she felt her tears fall warm upon her palms before she was aware of their flow.

This shock of reality recalled her. But she awoke to the old reality, feeling a new charm. Her being was now personally blended with his purely personal act of playing quite apart from the spell of the music itself. It seemed to her that whatever commonplace act he might



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do now would have some of the halo of that night about it, and be right.

It was so when he thoughtlessly turned out the only light and left her hatless in the dark, both tittering while they both sought it, and both put it on—he insisting upon tying the strings; she yielding because it was only right to yield to please one who had done so much to please her. It was so when, to lead her up the dark gallery, he put his arm through hers. It was so when, before passing through the door to the light on the tower stairs, he paused, lifted her face, and kissed it. Yes, it was so even then. Then, indeed, it had a solemn aptness, in unity with all the pity, reverie, and subdued gladness of that eventful night.

When, without releasing her arm, he put out the final tower light, and descended the stairs a little closer to her than before, she felt as if divinely accompanied, walking down the golden stairs of the new heaven and earth of rapture. Not even the church-yard dispelled the new joy. Not even Millgate Lane, though she crossed it alone. Not even the Old Mill kitchen, with Margit cross, Ark silent, Rollie jocular, and Tom and Tim like funeral mutes.

CHAPTER XIII

MEG AGREES

ONE bright, glowing evening the curate met Ark and thanked him for persuading Meg. Ark said he had not persuaded her.

"Indeed? She's learning the lines—"

"Nay, mister! Nay!"

"And so quickly that we thought you were teaching her. You should hear her! She'll make an excellent Wakes Wife. But you're not vexed?"

"It'll be too public. She'd be better quiet." Then Ark muttered, feeling duped: "And she's learning the lines? I've wondered what she were brooding at up-stairs. And it's that?"

"Now, don't discourage her—and us."

"Hey, mister, mister, she's your pupil. She goes her own and your way with it. If it means good old-fashioned fun for her and others, let 'em have it—let 'em have it. Only she—no, no. I may be wrong. Maybe. Are you going yourself with the Wakes cart around the Brow an' Dale?"

"Of course I am."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"You'll like it as much as any of us, my man."

"I hope so. I'll try. I'll do my best."

"Well done!" said the curate, moving off; "well done!"

"A minute! Excuse me," said Ark, in low, earnest



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tones; "you see my mother an' me have rather near feelings to Meg, and we've a right to be wondering. You are new among us; do you know your organist well?"

"Very well."

"Think so?"

"Sure."

"Um—ha—"

"Why?"

"He comes from a strange stock of mischief, you know."

"He can't be blamed for his father."

"Maybe it 'll be said his father can't be blamed for him some day, and it's that I'm thinking about."

"Mr. Mowcroft's not of the best, I know. But Owen is all right. You needn't be afraid of that."

"But 'needn't' is needn't, and 'is' is *is*. I am afraid. I own it. I'm no tell-tale, but I've every right to have my eyes open, and I may tell you that though I see Owen Mowcroft going straight into the church porch on Sunday mornings, I've seen him come crookéd out of the porch of the Mill Stones Inn on Saturday nights. You understand?"

"But I know Owen Mowcroft well. Very well."

"And yet maybe your well isn't a well with all the truth at the bottom."

"Why, exactly as you speak of him I've heard him speak of his father. Nay, stronger. Have you not heard—surely you must have done—that he once vowed—"

"I've heard it."

"That if his father ill-treated his mother and sister—"

"That were years ago. Years. He were but a laddy lad then. We've all heard that. Still, your knowledge may be better than mine, and if I've done him one word of an injury or half a thought of a wrong, I'm sorry, and there's my hand on it."

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The curate took Ark's hand. But he was thinking too much of the puzzling Owen Mowcroft to reciprocate Ark's impulsive grasp as Ark remarked, "I only tell you what my own eyes have seen."

The curate parted awkwardly, with an uncomfortable consciousness that this was the third report of the kind. He went down Millgate Lane and Ark went up, both with misgivings.

Ark, to wear out his moodiness before going home, slowly crossed Millgate Lane and turned down The Black Cat's Tail.

At the bottom his deepened moodiness drew him along the path to the left across the field, thinking, thinking of Meg—Meg the mystery, Meg the spell that broke his heart yet lured his soul to still pursue.

With the dull heaviness of a bee that crosses a stem from a flower where it has sipped until the sweetness has become a drug, Ark slowly mounted the little hand-rail bridge and crossed it.

On the bridge he became conscious of two figures, vague, at a great distance on the Beck path. By the sunlit poppy on a hat, he knew that one was Meg; by the exasperating logic of events, he knew that the other was Mowcroft.

For the relief of action, Ark, without knowing it, picked up a stone. He strolled with it cold in his warm palm, but the only facts he was conscious of were Meg's poppy, sorrowfully brilliant to him, and Mowcroft's stride, provokingly confident.

When he discovered the stone warm in his hand he marvelled—wondering, with the dazing heat of one questioning his own sanity, where he had picked it up? And why? What could his unconscious thought have meant?

With a shrug of moral pain he impatiently plunged the stone into the Blue Beck.

Like a significant hint, the hollow plop sounded to Ark



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as if the innocent running water had been viciously hurt.

"What in unknown mischief are my senses *after*?" he again asked himself. "Where is all this Meg pain leading me?"

"You're jealous!" a gurgling swirl in the water seemed to say.

A corresponding swirl of feeling in Ark peevishly retorted, "Why not? It's enough to make God in heaven jealous! Why not?"

He enviously looked along the Beck path for the two figures. They had disappeared. He was more bitterly envious than when they were in sight. He looked down at the water—at the now irritating historical spot where his father, seventeen years before, had found a bundle of life. With a new exasperation of heart Ark wished that the bundle had been lost to this world forever. It seemed as if his mother, with her curious insight, had been right, after all. Her wild prophecies and hints seemed to be coming true, crossing him, leading him on, yet blocking his path. He moved forward to follow the pair, but quickly turned himself and his passion right-about-face.

"No!" he almost said aloud, "I'll be no spy upon her. But Heaven help her to know Mowcroft in time; and to really know me—aye, all of us—better than she does."

At the Old Mill House, Rollie Rondle was sitting alone opposite the fire, adding a superfluous, flushing heat to his own natural, plump, red warmth.

He was patiently waiting for any casual event that might happen to emphasize the delight of leisure. His idea had been to have a sunset stroll with Ark—and with Meg as well, if her high and mighty highness only would. But Rollie found the kitchen deserted, and took the easiest possible possession of Ark's low arm-chair, with his legs a full length towards the fire and his ankles crossed.

Rollie heard Margit moving to and fro overhead, but



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she might have been moving on the distant floor of one of the stars, she was so far removed from his active thoughts of Ark, Meg, and himself.


A very young black retriever pup, round and Rollie-Rondle-like, which Meg on the previous night had brought in as an anonymous gift and a prospective pet, soon rested its fore-paws and head upon Rollie's crossed ankles as if at a prayer-stool.

Rollie recalled Meg's amusement when he formally christened the pup "Megster," by trickling three teaspoonfuls of milk down its glossy head; and he now felt the woolly plumpness of the little thing at his feet like a warm representative of Meg herself.

This feeling was pleasantly intensified when Megster crept fully upon his ankles and lay with the head and fore-paws drooping over one side, and the hind-legs and tail over the other, like a wool-seller's trade sign of a black lamb suspended from the middle of the back.

To increase Megster's felicity and his own reveries, Rollie, without uncrossing his ankles, drew his feet upward like a new patent crane crank, took off the pup, lowered the patent crank again, nestled the plump, limp creature upon his shoulder, and cuddled it between his cheek and hands.

By this vivifying device, very much aided by closed eyes and an open imagination, Rollie still more vividly thought of Meg. With the warmth at his feet, the warmth at his neck, and particularly the intermediate warmth about his heart, Rollie's full blood overflowed upon his brain with such dreamy personal delights of reverie that no one but Meg and himself inhabited time or space. He and she were glowingly alone. The earth itself did not exist. He lived in a seventh heaven of amorous dream, where Meg, in the easy pliability of his own free fancy, was all in all. At an acutely ecstatic crisis of this state of dream Megster was abruptly lifted



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from Rollie's shoulder and thrown straight up towards the ceiling. Its wriggle, its three-legged kick, and especially its jerky yap in mid-air, wakened Rollie. Laughing, he caught Megster in its head-over-heels descent, and sympathetically stroked it on his knee, precisely as he imagined Meg would have done after a similar crisis.

During that rite of animal mesmerism Rollie hypnotized himself again. He was so much impersonating the feelings of Meg that he again lifted the pup towards his face, and even allowed the active red speck of a tongue to lick his cheek and tickle his brow in a reminiscent dalliance imitative of her.

A sudden butt from Megster's cold nose, however, brought Rollie back to Rollie again. All the glowing thoughts now seemed separated from him in a past made suddenly remote. With a great sigh over the real state of facts, as against their ideal condition in the fancy, he drowsily rose and tilted Megster upon the nearest chair. While on his legs Rollie thrust his two hands into his jacket-pockets, and with a shudder shook his clothing on him as a dog shakes its coat after a sleep. Completely in the depressing world of facts now, he yawned. He was even too depressed to take one of his hands out of a pocket so as to be polite to the silent but active company of reflections of himself grotesquely exaggerated in the seven bright oval dish-covers above the mantel-shelf—so there was one broad yawn in the centre of the kitchen, and seven broader ones upon the wall. Rollie's eye caught the effect; but, for a wonder, he was too depressed to acknowledge the fun of it, and he again languidly sank into Ark's low easy-chair, trying to think back into dreams. He again stretched his legs at full length to the fender. Again he crossed his ankles; again he set his mind, like a newly started clock, towards reverie.

But reverie declined to act. The mind, now grossly

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awake, refused to dream. This being so, he sat more with Ark than with Meg.

"Puzzlin', hold-off, say-nought Ark! Why doesn't he speak his inside out an' settle it for us all? All of us can't sweetheart her. But young Mowcroft never shall! Never! That is, if me an' th' Almighty can help it! *And*, if Ark doesn't seek soon, by the Lord Harry and Uncle Tom Toddy, I'll seek quick an' soon mysen. I'll sweetheart up to my Sunday best, win her if I can, fix Whitweek, mount the church-tower, an' ring my own peal o' bells!"

"*See here, Rollie,*" whispered Margit, stealthily coming from the staircase with a dingy piece of folded writing-paper. "*Can you read black-lead?*"

"Read black-lead?" asked Rollie to gain time to think what Margit wanted, whispering like mischief over a bit of paper that was evidently Ark's. He wouldn't read it for her, but he would get it for Ark. "Read black-lead? Aye, Margit."

"Well, read this, good lad."

"Let's see it, Margit—"

"Nay, nay; in *my* hands," she said, as a device to force his interest.

"Read black-lead, indeed! Why, I've been readin' mysen in black-lead on your oven-door till I thought I were haunted."


"Husht with nonsense for a bit, Rollie, and read for me."

"Give me hold, then!"

"Nay, in my hand," she repeated with deepened mystery to lure Rollie.

"I were fair haunted, I tell thee. I stared an' stared till I couldn't tell whether my ghost in the oven-door were Indian-red, nigger-black, or shimmery-shiney white, and I nearly—"

"Oh, do husht! Here, have it in your own hand, then.



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Read it out, Rollie, lad. I've a cutting of tart in the cupboard."

"Tart first, readin' after!" he called, surveying the partly opened sheet of foolscap to know how to secretly act the best for Ark, for he had no suspicion that Margit had been studying the dimmed writing for the past hour.

"Nay. No readin', no tart. Don't be sly-quizzin' it, Rollie, just to see if it's worth readin'. It *is* worth it—I *think*. I think it is. I'm anxious for poor Ark's peace o' mind. So read it *out*, lad."

"I will read it out, Margit."

"Do, lad."

"Outside," and he rose, simply to gain more time.

"But you won't!" and Margit stood against the big front door, like a pygmy against a castle gate.

"Surely you'll give me time to learn my lessons?" he said, flurried, opening the foolscap sheet at full length, almost unconscious of his acts, conscious only of the one deep emotional effect that was growing owing to a line he had read. "Give me time!" he repeated, like an echo in a state of far-off abstraction, as in a quickly scanning eagerness he read to himself the lines :

"You may talk of buzzing bee,
Humming honey from the flow'rs,
But the blithest bee to me
Is that humming Meg of ours."

He bit his lip—unconscious of that too.

"I *thought* it were somethin' worth knowin'," she said, with a private twitch of gratification on her lips. "Out with it lad."

"Bless my heart, Margit," he replied, utilizing his genuine feeling to help diplomaoy, "give a fellow time! Black-lead's only the faint ghost of ink, you know, an'

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I'm used to pen-work in best copper-plate. Give me time. Do. *I'll* read it."

"Aye, you're readin' it now," she called, privately gratified that he was, for Margit had deciphered enough of the document to know that its language would bite deeply into Rollie and set him more definitely in the direction of Meg.

"Nay! . . . Oh, nay! . . . Nay, Margit!" he called, much to Margit's amusement, for to her delight he was even then irresistibly reading the next clearest piece of writing:

"Oh, you bonny Meg of ours—
Nay, you winsome Meg o' mine!
I would part with all the flow'rs
For that posie-look o' thine!"

"What are you doin' with this, Margit?—where'd you get it?" asked Rollie, with a defensive tone on behalf of Ark as he took out his big red-cotton handkerchief. "Somehow black-lead always acts watery on my eyes, I've noticed," he said, making elaborate use of the handkerchief. But even while he called in muffled tones from the handkerchief, "Sit thee down, Margit," to the increased gratification of Margit, his glistening eye was reading over the red folds:

"Here I picture with my eyes,
Here I hearken with my brain,
Till the tears of love arise,
Drowning all in Life again."

"It's nought but a long list o' cogs and wheels, Margit," said Rollie, with decision.

"It's more! It's wheels inside o' wheels. I've read enough of Meg this an' Meg that mysen to understand that. It *is* our Ark's pennin', isn't it?"

"No."



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"'Tis!"

"It's not pennin' at all."

"It is! An' his, too!"

"It isn't—it's pencillin'."

"Hey, Rollie Rondle, but you'd provoke a woman's tongue down her throat. But sithee, lad, here's the cuttin' o' tart all to your own self, an' you can come to supper all week an' dinner on Sunday."

"I like to eat one meal at a time, Margit . . . an' I've enough food to think on for a month."

"To think on? How d'you mean?"

"In this tart—of course."

"Out of it, you mean!" called Margit, flushing with the irrepressible blood of her deeply thought diplomacy now reaching the point of effective use.

"Rollie!" she said, with the briskness of a spark, if a spark could speak when flying red-hot, "you dote on Meg!"

"Margit Millgate!"

"Now then, husht! Husht a bit. An' you needn't turn your eyes as if you're goin' to swallow 'em down their sockets to make me think I'm wrong. I'm not wrong. The seein' Margit right inside o' me is right, as she always is right in the kind of sight folk call second; but it's the kind as really comes foremost and first to me. Now, Rollie, sit thee down; I've a say as must be said; I've somethin' in as must come out; I've somethin' dumb as must be heard. If ever feather hugged nest-warm-close to a bird, you hug warm-close to Meg."

"Now look here, Mrs. Millgate—"

"I'll look nowhere on earth or in the heavens but straight before me—and that's at Meg and you. You an' Meg. She's *your* bird o' paradise, Rollie Rondle. Ark hasn't the chance of a bantam with her. You know why. He knows why, poor lad. Meg wants a lad she can be

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vain of, as a cock is vain of its tail an' comb; and Ark has no more chance of hatching himself for her eye than a China nest-egg has a chance of being a Cochinchina chick. An' if he had, he'd be a cockerel as wouldn't crow! He wouldn't speak. It's all cruel hard on him, it is."

Rollie continuously shook his head, meaning that in very truth it was hard upon poor Ark.

"I've shaken my head for him, too, Rollie," said Margit, with superficial pathos, and cutely withholding the fact that she had really shaken her head with fear for Ark because Meg was approaching the direful age of her mother when Meg was born, and was now showing corresponding symptoms of waywardness which Margit hoped would spend themselves upon any one's son but her own. "Yes, I've shaken my head, Rollie, until my poor head has seemed to begin to shake me, with its thoughts of him. But life is life. Love is love, dear lad! You can't make a hen of a wren, or a finger of a thumb, or an arm of a hand. They're only wren, thumb, an' hand, after all. An' *so*, you can't make a Rollie Rondle as *is* loved out of a Ark Millgate as isn't. One's one, an' t'other's t'other; and Meg sides for t'other—an' that's you."

"Nay! For neither on us!"

"True, lad, if *you* don't look sharp and side it for yoursen, yon wastrel Mowcroft will step in, step out, and then break all our hearts like a set o' tea-cups; and Meg's cup of a heart with the greatest smash of all. Rollie! Don't fool slow with it. Brace up. Meg fancies to you, I know, for 'love and a cough can never be hid.' So 'Grip Griffin, hold fast,' as the sign-board says. Never you heed Sarah Ann an' Sallie Dootson; they'd talk a good-hearted lad like you to marry a candle if they only lit up gay a bit. But I double-warn you, Rollie! Mark me, if you side up to Sallie Dootson—nay, I'll put it if you side *down* to Sallie Dootson, for she's a size and color beneath Meg in every way—if you side down to Sallie

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Dootson, Meg will go as the lightnin' goes, and you won't know where nor how. She'll run. That's as true—"

Rollie took up Megster and nursed it on his lap.

"That's as true as three things certain—that that black puppy's mother is at the Mill Stones Inn, that Mowcroft gave it Meg, and that the Almighty is both in the heavens and out of them. Take my advice, Rollie, lad; an' not mine only if I speak the truth, for last night I had a dream on it."

"Well?"

"I saw a fiddle—"

"What's your advice?"

"A fiddle, Rollie, as big as the church, an' a dog as little as a fly were playin' on it a tune as I've heard Meg lately hummin', as if keepin' it secret betwixt her thoughts and somebody else."

"Aye; well? Get on. What's the advice? You'll have some of them in soon."

"Right, Rollie; keep me to th' point. This writin' is Ark's, isn't it?"

Rollie nodded, looking down, fingering the pup's ear.

"Make a clean pen-ink copy an' give them to Meg. See, lad?"

"No, I don't see, Margit. What for?"

"Why, she'll think them all out of your own head—"

"No!" he called, flinging the pup towards the fender and rising. "By blazin' blue conscience, no!"

"Listen, Rollie—"

"No more o' that!" he commanded, walking to Ark's bench.

"Do."

"No!" he said, bringing both fists down upon the bench. "No, no!" he added, doubling the blows.

"The day you'd wed, I'd—"

"Margit! I may be a silly-sallie, pokey-jokey chip-chap for three hundred and sixty-four and a half days

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in the year ; but hang an' dang me, I'm no liar and thief on the other half-day, when it's betwixt me and Ark. I don't play double and dupe. No, no. I'd sooner—"

"You're nought but a simple-simon big fool of a babby-child, Rollie Rondle !"

"I am, Margit ; that's just exactly precisely to the double D D what I am ; because I'm standing here like a creature o' Christian kindness instead of worryin' you like the raving terrier that I feel has gone tearin' mad in me. Margit, I've done with you. I won't say you've made my blood boil. That would 'a' been cool an' refreshin' to what I feel. You've made me—"

The front door was opened.

"Hullo, Ark !" called Rollie, hiding the paper at his side.

Ark closed the door, looking very fagged. As he cast down his hat, Rollie sat near the fire, slipping the paper under him on his chair.

"We're just waiting for you," added Rollie, rather provokingly smiling at Margit.

While Ark went to feel in the pockets of a jacket behind the door, Margit took her first chance to appealingly tug Rollie's sleeve. That was not enough, so she pressed her fist over her lips as her most vigorous sign for only the discreetest kind of speech.

But Rollie forthwith asked, "Have you lost anything, lad ?"

"Not exactly, Rollie. Why, have you found anything ?"

"Your mother has."

Margit looked like an arrested transfiguration as she said, "Hey, you over-born liar, Rollie Rondle !"

"She's found a cap of yours."

"Aye ?" remarked Ark, not much heeding and going towards the stairs.

"A foolscap," called Rollie, with an effort to laugh as



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Ark entered the staircase, trying to make even his steps sound indifferent as he mounted out of sight.

The instant that Ark was safely away, Margit said with passion which almost defeated her whispering, "Give me yon paper, Rollie Rondle!"

"Nay, nay," answered Rollie, with a half-humorous version of his still injured feelings. "How can I give it to Meg if I give it to thee?"

"You'll give it in fun, an' make mischief in earnest. Ark's seekin' it, I'm sure; let me take it back!"

"Nay. Oh, nay. Hardly, Margit. Hardly. You don't half kill me, and then cure me by leaving me for dead. No, no."

"I'll cure the whole lot of you! I'm not goin' to have my poor head fitch-fatch-fidgeted on top o' my soul an' body all because of the wimp-wamp-poutin' of a wench as is beginnin' not to know hersen from her witch of a mother, or men from monkeys!"

"You've cert'ily got my man-monkey up, as high above my back and as around down over my face as a monkey-on-a-stick can jerk. You have so, and it has a tale just about as long as this paper."

"Give it back!"

"Next year, Margit, when th' monkey's had time to climb down."

Margit attempted to snatch the paper from Rollie's hand, but failed. In her backward retreat she most effectually trod upon the pup's tail. It crawled across the kitchen yelping, looking as if trying to hug its pain.

"Hey, lor', what with dog pups and men puppies I fair think the death-dog Trash has gotten into this old house. Hear to it! See it! Whining afore the very door—as sure a sign as seein' a windin'-sheet waitin' for you in a candle."

Meg's hand was heard on the front-door latch.

Rollie folded the paper and put it into his pocket.

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Meg entered panting and flushed, like a girl after a waltz that has been too long for the shortness of breath, but too short for the length of delight. Even the quivering poppy in her hat looked as if it were redder, and trembling with some unexampled ecstasy of life.

She had never looked more fully Rollie's glowing idea of Meg. He seemed to see her through wine. Suddenly, however, his lips met, and were held hard and tight. Had she and Ark been walking together? Had they slyly come in apart? Rollie felt depressed, duped. Was Ark fair and square? Rollie pettishly decided to have nothing sly with any one, and went up-stairs after Ark.

He found Ark all-absorbed among a jumble of scraps and papers like an old maid's drawer of indestructible relics.

Upon Rollie's entrance Ark began to blow a subdued loose version of a tune through his slack lips, like the mere whisper of a whistle in soliloquy. This strain of assumed gayety suddenly touched Rollie's sympathy. When he saw the bluish crescent beneath Ark's sunken eyes, his sympathy deepened like a bottomless well.

"Had a walk, Ark?"

Ark broke his tune to say, "A bit of a turn, Blue Beck way," and resumed his whistle.

"All alone?"

"Alone, an' not alone; with an' without, lad," and again he whistled low, as he continued his search.

"How with an' without?" asked Rollie, catching sight of an old photograph of a girl in short skirts. He could see that it was of Sallie Dootson when little, but reserved this knowledge for further use in case of need.

"How do you mean, Ark?"

"With, in sight; without, in sound." He resumed his whistle in a lower key.

"Meg, d'you mean?"

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"She's been follin' it with Mowcroft, Rollie. I saw them along the Blue Beck."

"An' didn't you do ought! Didn't you speak?"

"Speak, Rollie? Speak, lad? Nay, nay. If her own wish wishes for the fellow, what can any of us do, least of all—me?"

"Wig him! No; not quite that."

"Hey, I feel as if I'd do ought to him, to her, or mysen, to end it!"

Rollie looked alarmed as he asked, "Why, there's nought ugly? Nought afresh?"

"When the lass was first found," answered Ark, with deep feeling throbbing throughout him, "I was a lad—I remember it, I sometimes wish I didn't and couldn't—a lad, Rollie, as black outside as the pit flues I cleaned; but in, I was as clean white as this paper; not a scrat across me. I wish I were a flue lad still, I do. I wish I were hid in coal-dust from her; hid in the earth from her. I could fair walk to my grave to get her out o' mind!"

"Nay, nay, Ark."

"All the world's opened up with dark thoughts I never wanted to know, and bad feelings I never knew could be. She's changed me, Rollie. And is still changing me!"

"List, Ark—"

"She's turned me as black as a sump-hole. She's changed all my nights an' days. I'm beginning to think my mother was right!"

"Husht; she'll hear. Sit thee down, lad."

"She's going like her own mother, Rollie."

"Sit thee down, an' be still."

"No wonder my father used to say there was no such church an' chapel thing as a God. Meg's made me believe it. Oh, God!—the happiness we one time gave her, and the pain she's giving us now; the pain she's giving me!"

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He shuffled his papers to and fro more at random, while Rollie was twisting his brow and feeling his head through his hair.

"And somebody's been upsetting these!" said Ark.

"Judgin' by what I've seen your two hands do whiles standin' here, Ark, I should say somebody has. What are you seekin'?"

"A line or two," he answered, more in his ordinary vein.

"Fishin'-line, clothes-line, railway line—or what?"

"A fishin'-line of a sort, as you put it that way," and he more definitely inspected each folded and unfolded scrap of paper.

"Rollie, I'll tell thee my plan." He looked at the closed door, and then faced Rollie. "But no mischief, Rollie! It won't bear it, lad. I can't bear it. And time's time. Mowcroft's making queerish headway with Meg."

"Far too fast!"

"Well, a bit o' scribble I did some time ago—"

"Aye? H'm—"

"It 'll seem a silly laddish way to you, Rollie, but it's *my* way—the only way I have. All I want now is to save her. Save her, Rollie! It's come to that. I've thought that maybe if I gave the old lines she'd think of old times, and hold off Mowcroft for the sake of us all."

"Aye?" said Rollie, with a mental wink. "Cert'ily, it isn't my way," he added, with his irrepressible touch of comedy as he roguishly mused that perhaps the very lines in question were at that instant sandwiched between his finger and thumb in his vest-pocket. "Though I must be straight. Ark," he continued, with the new comical idea of there and then reading out Ark's lines as his own, "I must be straight, an' tell thee that about a century o' months ago, when the full moon were on, I mysen scribble-scrabbled something rhymey to Meg."



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Ark specially lifted his face to gaze mystified at Rollie. Then his eye sidled inquiringly at Rollie's somewhat expressive finger and thumb in his vest-pocket. Ark's look just then was so exceedingly sad that Rollie repented, and wondered how he could turn his idea to serious account.

"Hullo!" he said, with mock impulse, as if he then saw for the first time the withered old photograph of Sallie Dootson as he took it from Ark's papers, "who's the picture?"

"You ought to have eyes to know that, lad," said Ark. "You know her well enough in these days."

"Nay?" said Rollie, with mock scepticism.

"It's Sallie Dootson in short frocks."

"Never!" exclaimed Rollie, pretending to receive it as a revelation. "So it is, now as I look into her laughin' eyes," he added, playing double. Then, as if the portrait had become of the keenest personal value, he said, "You don't want it, Ark! Give it me! Do, now!"

"Well, from all I hear, you own Sallie herself in these days, Rollie, so you may as well have her as she was in those days. Keep it."

They heard Meg playing the fiddle. They stood listening as if to some emotional expression of hers that they might interpret to good account.

The tune was a new one from Meg. That night, indeed, it had passed from the haunting stage into a tune made definite. For the first time she could clearly hear its plaintiveness; for the first time she knew the detail of its simple, slow swell of rhythm; and, moreover, she for the first time then felt the "great deep-down longing" which Owen Mowcroft enthusiastically said it expressed each time he played it on the organ.

It was the tune of the Welsh "Land of my Fathers," baldly represented in English by the words—

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"O land of my fathers, the land of the free,
The home of the harp so hallow'd to me,
Thy daring defenders were gallant and brave,
For country and freedom their passions they gave.

"Wales, Wales, the home of my heart is in Wales,
Till death be passed
My love shall last
In longing and yearning for Wales."

Rollie, not to break the musical spell resounding with an echoing mellowness in the staircase, whispered, "What do you think of—that?"

Ark replied, very sadly, "It's a new bit o' Mowcroft, Rollie."

"You don't say?" answered Rollie, in deep tones of real concern, for there was depth in the air and depth in the playing.

"But it is, dear lad. A new bit o' Mowcroft. And the mischief is, it's a good bit."

"And she's glad to make the most of it."

"You play it well, dear lass!" muttered Ark.

"But how d'you know it's Mowcroft's?"

"I've heard it come buzzin' o'er the way from the organ."

"It's the sting an' not the buzz o' the bee it has for my ear, lad!"

"No; not quite," slowly muttered Ark, still listening. "It's some o' the bee's honey turned sour."

"Let's go down, Ark—and stop it."

"Nay; no stoppin'. Let her play it out, if it's her wish. But we might go down, for the playing's sure to be stinging mother as it stings you, lad. You go first, Rollie."

Rollie led the way. They stepped from the staircase into the kitchen on tiptoe, and their presence acted like a double mute upon the fiddle. Meg continued to play,



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but she was more self-conscious, and the fine tune fell under the blight of a secondary order of feeling and will, and therefore of execution.

Rollie and Ark sat near the fireplace as silent but as combustible as smoke. They awaited Meg's pleasure. Margit was meditatively standing opposite the grate, with the poker like a bright iron buttress supporting her from falling into the fire, as if the music had mesmerized her last poke into dazed inactivity. Seeing Rollie and Ark, Margit expected Meg to stop the fiddle as a mark of that respect to them which Meg had failed to show to her.

But on, on the pathetic tune went ; and still on.

Meg and the fiddle seemed to have been set to go like a clock, and go they did. Meg, indeed, began to hum, "Wales, Wales, the home of my heart is in Wales," as if the playing had merely been by way of prelude to the real musical evening then about to begin.

Kicking the fender until the tongs and stool jumped, and petulantly pitching her voice an octave higher than the fiddle, and a full *forte* louder than the fiddle and Meg, Margit, poker in hand, stepped towards the performer and called :

"For the pity of one's poor Bedlam ears put that weany-whiney string-box down, or I'll play on it the last time it 'll ever play with this here poker !"

Rollie was betrayed into a chuckle ; but Ark stepped forward and tugged appealingly at his mother's skirt. She, however, snatched the fold from him, banged the poker into its place in the fender, and paced to and fro pettishly glorying in her success, for the fiddle had stopped as suddenly as if the bridge had gone.

Meg was hanging it on the wall opposite the fire. More through some sixth sense of visual consciousness than through actual sight she perceived Ark's pitiful anxiety, so for his sake, instead of going up-stairs, as

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she felt very much inclined to do, she took up her knitting—one of her own black stockings sensitively rolled from sight up to where she was beginning to “take-in” for the ankle. She sat a little isolated, near the staircase, dimly wondering where Owen Mowcroft’s gift, the pup, was ; but afraid to ask or even look.

Margit called to her across space : “ Have you nought to knit with the needle of your tongue, after your all-night gallivantin’ till your boots are more like Blue Beck mud nor leather? Maybe, if your own hands fiddled them boots with a brush every morning like mine do, you’d make every step think twice for itself and once for you !”

Ark vigorously motioned to his mother to suppress herself.

“ But I won’t, Ark ! It’s more nonsense than a body with the commonest o’ common-sense can abide an’ abear. Because we’re all quiet home-birds, poor fledglin’s o’ kitchen pidgins, we’re mere nobodies to her ; but I suppose if we only played a street organ, an’ tugged a mustache with one hand an’ a monkey at the end of a string with the other, we’d *be* somebody ; we’d be worth walkin’ an’ talkin’ with, then !”

Rollie gladly saw his chance for seasonable banter, saying, “ If we tugged our mustache with one hand and tugged the monkey with the other, how would we play the organ, Margit ? With our tongue or our wisdom teeth ? Which ?”

“ Don’t let your tongue talk o’ wisdom, Rollie Rondle ; you haven’t cut it anywhere in your head.”

“ No need. It were foreborn in me from head to foot. All my muscles are brain.”

“ Your brain’s all muscle, you mean ; and soft muscle at that.”

Rollie laughed, purposely allowing Margit to have the credit of the last retort, in the hope of winning her over to good-humor.



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Critical moments of doubtful silence followed. Meg, for the sake of some little sensation of herself in the painful isolation, slowly dangled her foot like a pendulum.

Ark saw it and understood. He ardently hoped that his mother would either see it and understand, or not see it and continue quiet.

With intense exasperation, Margit exclaimed, "Don't dingle-dangle-doo yon scarlet foot at *me!*"

Rollie rose and in a pacifying way embraced Margit by the shoulder; but Margit's open hand caught him such a whack upon his cheek that Ark called, "Mother! Cruel! For shame! What in th' name o' pity's to do with you? Sit down!"

The pup crept from beneath a chair and, vaguely looking about, whined an appeal for Meg's familiar petting hand.

"Hey, Lord, Lord, there's *that* death-dog on the hearth again! Here!" said Margit, swinging it up by the slack skin at the neck, and with a fierce growl she flung it crashing through a window-pane on the left of the door.

Ark seized Margit, holding her fast, while Rollie and Meg opened the door to seek the pup.

Rollie picked it up, bleeding, apparently dead.

"Come along with it to Mrs. Dootson's, Meg," he said, starting in that direction. "This blood would make Margit a murder or two worse. *I'll* take care of it for you at Sarah Ann's."

Meg surprised and puzzled Rollie by thrusting her arm through his. He winked at a star, pleased; he bit his lip, pained. He nerved himself up to enjoy, and yet resist. He would turn her clinging to good, general account—and begin at once!

"I know where you got this bull-and-fox-terrier and cinder-eating retriever puppy from."

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"Where?"

"Well, if you put it in the Mill Stones Inn it would bark for rum hot, and if you put it in church it would mount the organ-stool and play hymns—"

Meg withdrew her arm.

"I told you I knew!" he said, quietly taking her hand and with masterful deliberation drawing it through his arm again.

Meg did not resist, but said, "You don't understand. None of you do. Even you don't!"

"We don't, lass. That's the true misunderstandin' fact. What it is you can see in *him* goes round and round our heads an' never in our heads, and we give it up."

With more spirit, Meg again withdrew her arm. Rollie did not try to replace it. He was afraid he might fail.

"What do you, what can you, see in him? Now, fair!"

With daring she replied, "What do you see in Sallie Dootson?"

He bit his lip hard. What could he say? "If you," he perversely answered, "see as much in him as I see in her, then I understand; that makes it clear—it settles it, does that."

"It doesn't. I'm sorry for him; you can't be sorry for her!"

"Never mind whether I'm sorry for Sallie or not. Will he be sorry for you?"

"There's nothing to be sorry for."

"Isn't there, though!"

"What?"

"Well—making you too proud for our kind, now."

"I'm not!"

"You're ashamed of—poor Ark."

Meg had alertly held her wits ready to reply; but she had to think.



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"Ashamed!" added Rollie.

Her lips closed with annoyance.

"I'm—not—*ashamed*—of—him," she soon answered with slow care; but rapidly followed it with, "And it's cruel of you to say so. Cruel!"

"And you pity young Mowcroft more than you pity Ark! Well, well. I'm ashamed of *you*, now."

"You don't pity me, or you wouldn't speak like that."

Rollie firmly put his arm through hers, saying, "Meg! Pity? It's nought but pity that makes me speak. Pity for you, first. And next, pity for us all. Give up the choirin', lass; give it up."

"You can't trust me—"

"I can't trust him, and that's the truth, whether it hurts or not."

Meg was silent, turning over her experience with Mowcroft as a whole, as if it were the globe of an old world.

He added with depth, "I don't speak for my own ends, Meg."

"No," she silently answered, for a moment lifting her thoughts free from Owen Mowcroft, "it would be better for me if you did."

They were opposite Mrs. Dootson's, and as they were seen they had to enter.

About an hour later Rollie walked back with Meg. As they approached the Old Mill House he put the old sheet of foolscap paper into her hand, solemnly saying, "When you're up-stairs, read this. Believe ev'ry word. I do." That was enough, for he had himself clearly written Ark's name in full at the foot of the lines.

Meg soon went up-stairs. She read the lines. Nevertheless she fell asleep as if nothing vital or eventful had happened. But at intervals throughout the night she seemed to be re-reading,



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“ You may talk of buzzing bee,
Humming honey from the flow'rs,
But the blithest bee to me
Is that humming Meg of ours,”

and repeating them in the inward voiceless elocution of sleep.

In a dream Meg wished that Ark had not been the writer of the pleasant lines. Coming from him the compliment was not a great one. She dreamed very clearly that the verdict of most girls would have been, “ Ark Millgate? Only from *him!*” Now had Rollie Rondle penned them the praise would have tingled the cheek of every girl who knew him, as coming from an authority who could have a sweetheart in every street.

Meg awoke with a headache ; and an ache at the heart, too. How was it that her dream had taken no account whatever of Owen Mowcroft, who had brought more change into her life than all of them? In the dream he had had no existence. None! Not even after the kiss he had given her on the Blue Beck path the night before! Against the vivid remembrance of that, the dream as history was grotesque. Oh, she hated it all—the lines of Ark, the hugs of Rollie, yes, even the kiss of the other. Why was this kind of love in life at all? Or, if at all, why was not the course made clear?

An idea flashed upon her. She would pretend to believe that the lines were Rollie Rondle's. Not that she would trouble much about Rollie, but this would keep Ark from hoping. Moreover, she could show “ Rollie's lines ” to Owen Mowcroft in a way that would make him feel that he need not seek her again. They would part ; she would be free, free of them all, and wait for clearer guidance than her clashing ideas of right and wrong, pity and dislike, sympathy and impatience, yet seemed able to give.

CHAPTER XIV

ANOTHER DEVICE

A FEW days later the proprietor of Dale-o'-Brink pits, upon going to the fusty little office near the bank head, found that Owen Mowcroft, the assistant top-manager, had not arrived.

At mid-day a pit messenger on the way to Mowcroft's home met his sister Sabina on the way to the pit. She said that he had not been home since the previous day, when he and his father had quarrelled.

This news spread. At the Old Mill House that evening Ark suggested that the police should drag Merrywain's dam.

"Nay," said Rollie Randle, bluntly, "the only dam they may search for that chap is the last big damn of all. He'll be in that as sure as you and me, Ark, will be in Abrim's bosom."

"Then you're giving him an off-chance, Rollie, in your case," said Tom.

"And a good off-chance, too," chimed in Tim.

"It's too queer a dead-and-live thing to joke on," called Margit, "and for mercy-on-all-of-our-sakes say nought about it afore Meg when she does come—if she comes at all."

"The Wakes Song won't come off!" remarked Ark. "I'm glad. And Meg will be glad, too, I fancy."

"Then your fancy's a thing or two wrong," said Margit. "You can no more read the lass in the lass than

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she can read the real lad in you. She thinks you *want* her to do it. She says you do."

"And so I do—in a way."

Margit impatiently asked, "What are you in-a-waying at? You've always two long ways to a short one wish. You've always two or three long wishes for one short way. It would take the wishing-cap your father used to talk of to know which wish you wish to wish-at the most. Have a *mind*, and stick to it. Have a word, and speak out. Have a wish, and *will* it out of your head into your hands. In the Lord's name do!"

"Aye," called Rollie, "of course. Your mother's right. Look at me, Ark!" he added, hitting his expanded chest in ironical egotism. "I *wish* I had my supper. I've a *mind* to stay here for it; and I'll *will* to stick to it. I've a word for it, and I'll *speak out* till I get it!"

"Then you may speak yourself into breakfast-time," said Margit. "There's no supperin' here. Husht! Here's Meg."

Rollie began whistling.

"Oh, husht with that cock-sparrowing chirp," said Margit. "She'll know it's make-believe. Do you hear, Rollie?"

"And no joking her about young Mowcroft, lad," appealed Ark.

"*Or about ought in heaven or earth*," whispered Margit. "*She's not in the moods*. Nor me nayther."

Margit, Ark, Tom, and Tim, with great effort, desisted from looking at the opening door. The pause was too tempting to Rollie. He called to Meg,

"Have you heard the latest, Meg? It's news. News! When all Ark's clocks on the hospital wall there strike twelve o'clock at night together, I'm going to most mysteriously disappear in a sheet o' water; but I'm letting you know so that you'll be there with all your arms and two big clothes-lines to keep me back. At twelve o'clock



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by twelve clocks at Merrywain's dam! Do be there, lass, for my sake. If I'm found drowned, as they say, by twelve sensible coroner countrymen, they'll say I were lost all through thee."

Meg did not smile at the well-meant folly.

Margit testily asked, "What will you have to eat, Meg?"

Tom and Tim glanced aside at Meg, sympathetically waiting; and Ark looked down, pained with a consciousness of Meg's pain.

"Have some cold pie?" suggested Margit, with decision, vigorously going towards the cupboard.

Rollie, in the hope of breaking Meg's sombreness, jokingly carried his chair behind him to the table. He there made much ado about mimicking the cutting with a big imaginary knife of an imaginary pie of vast proportions.

Meg sat on the nearest chair by the door. She did so to hold in check a quivering of excitement that was taking possession of her limbs and throat.

Margit, turning from the cupboard empty-handed, pointedly asked, "What ails you, sitting like a crow over there?"

"Meg's all right, mother!" said Ark, bluntly. "She can sit anywhere she likes."

Meg's lower lip quivered as if invisible little torrents of sorrow were tumbling over it.

"Is that a scar on your temple?" demanded Margit.

Ark was the only one who did not look. Without a movement of anything but her eye, Meg gave the impression of trying to hide something.

"It's nought else but a scar," remarked Margit, conclusively. "Let me see!"

Meg turned away into shade. She felt a pitiable clash of mental pride and physical humiliation—for her face had been scratched by Kitty, the barmaid at the Mill

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Stones Inn. She was jealous; her importance had been modified, for Owen Mowcroft had only hinted his troubles to her, whereas giddy Kitty boasted that she knew all; that she had seen him before he ran away. These separate feelings made up one great feeling which kept Meg's words locked.

"Let me see!" repeated Margit, approaching the shadowed side of Meg.

"Leave the lass *be*, mother!" demanded Ark, "and stop the gaming, Rollie. Do. You'll have all time and eternity for the like o' that!"

"And I'll want all eternity to get out of these deep dumps. Hang, draw, drag, and quarter me if I don't really myster'ously disappear now in the bed of Merrywain's dam with a cold sheet o' water and the wet blanket of a showery night on me. Though I needn't go to Merrywain's for water; there'll be enough on the floor here, judging by the watery-moon look of all of your eyes."

"Has som'b'dy been scratting thee?" resumed Margit to Meg.


Ark went to his mother, murmuring, "For Heaven's sake, leave the lass alone a minute or two. Can't you see her's a bit shaken i' the nerves? Leave her be!"

"You leave *me* be, Ark. I suppose my nerves, because they're older, are second-hand by hers? She has a tongue for hersen, surely? A shaking, indeed? She wants one. Why, I saw the mark o' finger-nails on her. Four of 'em. And if she comes here with her lies about 'em, I'll put the truth about her shoulders with a strap—"

"But you won't," retorted Ark.

"As big and stiff proud as she is! She doesn't fool *me*."

"You fool yourself, mother, speaking like that. If she has been hurt, you'll get to know—in time; wait. Deng and confound it—wait!"



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"Haven't I been waiting ever since she crept in like a shadow trying to run from the light?"

"Now, Mother Hubbard, who won't go to the cupboard," called Rollie, with a double wink at Tom and Tim, "you insult Meg's shadow; you injure my substance; what about yon pie? Leave the lone lass alone, and think a bit of a bit bite-on for us four lads. Do. Tom and Tim are fair eating their own tongues wi' famishment. Look at 'em, mother."

"I wish you'd eat up yours!" answered Margit, approaching the table; but turning to Meg as she called, "Will you *have* a bit of pie—or *not*?"

"*No*," answered Meg, in a kindred tone. Margit swirled like a sail in a gust to the kitchen drawer—snatched out a white cloth—fiercely flung it wide on the round table—banged open the cupboard door—seized the dish with the section of pie—and swerved it downward upon the table.

"Ha! You've cracked the dish!" crowed Rollie.

"I think *she's* cracked," retorted Margit, flinging plates across the table like quoits, "and you!—an' every one o' ye!—starin', flarin' at me like loonies. Ev'ry one o' ye!" Then she dived her hands into the knife-box, and thrust knives and forks on the table as if they were daggers.

Rollie slipped under the table, calling, "When you've done conjuring wi' things of life an' death, you might tell me, Margit, please, kindly, an' thank you to have mercy on my—"

"Come out o' that, you torment!" she called, with a fruitless kick at him, as she placed the knives. "Now look at that, you've made me cross knives. You've cut my luck for this night, though it were already cut before. Come out o' that!" Margit italicized *that* with a quick kick on Rollie's shin. In playful revenge he pretended while rising to miscalculate the space above his

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back, and shelved the round table over. The white cloth slid like a loaded avalanche, delivering the plates, pie, knives, and forks upon the laps of Tom and Tim.

Meg started, and Ark called, "Do be quiet there! Have sense—all of ye!"

Margit retorted: "*You* have sense, and come and help to put wrong right, instead of moping and dopping there."

Ark only moved his lips into firmer position.

Tom and Tim righted the table, Rollie remarking,

"Well, I've heard of table-rapping and table-turning, but I never knew I were a spirit afore," a remark that acted upon Margit's irritation in such a supernatural way, as she was lifting a plate from the floor, that she swung it with enjoyable force against Rollie's round head. The plate broke into three pieces.

"Well!" she cried. "You demon! You witch's wastrel! You rascal! You're in with the evil spirit o' mischief to-night. I wanted to break your pate and you go and break my willy-pat'n plate as I've had uncracked these thirteen year. You've a head on you like a nail!"

"Well, you hit the nail on the head, so be satisfied," answered Rollie. He sat at the table again. This time he ostentatiously held a knife upright in one hand and a fork upright in the other like finger-posts, indicating which way Margit could safely send a share of the pie she was once more putting into position.

"Hey, for peace sake, Tom, pass the salt out of yon cupboard," called Margit; "I'll never get done. Nay! Sit thee down. *I'll* do it. Next, you'll be spilling *it*. 'Help me to salt and help me to sorrow'; an' what after that?"

"I once saw a two-horse cartload o' salt spilled in Cheshire," said Rollie; "and do you know what happened, Margit, because I looked at it? I were turned into a life-sized pepper-box! Fact. Then some chap

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coming along took me for the post-office pillar-box, an' started rammin' an' jammin' three letters and a newspaper down my mouth. 'Lor', said the chap, 'somebody's been busy with letters; this post's chock-full—I must walk to the general.' Then—"

"Hold in your nonsense!" called Margit, and then invited Ark to the table. He declined—because of Meg. Then she invited Tom and Tim. They also declined—because of Ark and Meg.

"Then a postman—"

"Hold your clatterin' silliness!" shouted Margit, with increased exasperation because of Ark and Meg. She fiercely cut the section of pie into equal parts. "Do hold your clitter-clatter—with *this*!" she repeated, sending one part to Rollie, keeping the other for herself. She began to eat with revengeful hunger, made ravenous by the tonic of ill-temper and spite.

"Then a postman comes along," resumed Rollie, winking at Tom and Tim, and only pretending to eat so as to lure Margit to continue, "and the postman started trying to unlock me with his key. He tickled me so that I forgot I were a life-sized pepper-box, and giggled. The poor chap had had a sup o' drink. He thought it was himself chucklin'—happy-like—so he tickle-tackled at me wi' the key again. But when he put his fingers in my vest-pocket, and filched the only three half-pence I were floatin' in the world on, I shook my peppery head at him. He sneezed so—you can't believe me?—it's truth—he sneezed so that his head snapped off into the gutter!"

"Hey, Lord, Lord," cried Margit, sincerely, "when will Thee make this lad have done lying enough to make a clock stop?"

Rollie laughed. "Snapped off! Clean into the gutter, Margit! And he stooped and picked it up, and wiped the dirt off, and put it on, and walked away."

Rollie at last tinted a small wedge of the pie with

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mustard. But as if saying grace before taking meat, he resumed: "Well, mates, all I can say as a stranger in the house is this—and I say it with a full heart—the only part o' me as is full—I say it's Christian goodness—good enough for Christmas of you three lads to hold off this pie, as the three of ye are, for my poor sake. I wouldn't have thought it of ye, I confess," and in went the little wedge of pie. "It's a kind o' kindness that shows the kind o' kindly kin ye are when you're kindled with the tinder of your tendermost feelings for a fellow human man on the brink o' starvation and Merrywain's dam. I can scarce eat for thinking on it. Fact. It feels as if your kindness has turned into solid meat a-purpose for me to eat it with mustard an' salt; and it's as tender as if your best Sunday feelings had been turned into Welsh mutton, it is."

Tom tittered.

"Fact, Tom."

Tim tittered.

"Real live fact, Tim. This gem o' jelly, see, and this crumb o' paste might be the twins o' good-nature like your two selves," he said, nibbling. "Fact, lads!"

"Oh, take your pie and have done!" implored Margit, disturbed in her eager eating.

"And have done? Nay, but that's cruel of you, Margit. Cruel. You ought to wish a pie as good as this to last forever."

"Take your pie and close your mouth, lad! Do!"

"Margit, you've an overflush of sense in your composition. You put two thoughts where common folk such as me can only crush in one. I'll defy even you, Margit, to do the double trick of closing your mouth and taking your pie, as clever as you are."

He glanced around, discovering that Ark had crossed the kitchen to Meg.

Margit made urgent signals to Rollie for silence.



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There was silence. All wanted to hear what they imagined were the mutterings of Meg.

But it was not muttering. It was that throbbing, wordless murmur of Meg's whole being trying to harmonize its futile littleness with some big, overmastering phase of fate. To Meg it was a fate that seemed double. It was personal and yet impersonal. It was partly in her individuality, but mostly in the universe. It was within the finite surroundings about her, but chiefly outside in the infinite beyond. It was partly in momentary time, and yet mainly in the eternity threatening to begin there and then forever.

How, how, she asked herself, bending near Ark, how could she reconcile all the conflicting units of life and love? How reconcile herself and weak but pitiful Owen Mowcroft? Herself and this devoted and clever but—dwarfish—Ark? How harmonize herself with Ark and happy, random Rollie Rondle? How make herself do justice to modest, inoffensive, and affectionate Tom and Tim? How blend herself with superstitious and crotchety Margit? How? Each life was like a separate nerve. If she soothed one she would twinge another to the very quick of its love. Could love be plucked out of herself? Plucked out—crushed—ignored? If the heart then beating against the barriers of her breast were in truth the organ of love, she could cast it from her like a stone; and yet its very beating told her that it was also the seat of life. But was such life as hers just then worth keeping? Was the whole frame, from head to foot, worth possessing at the cost of such pangs to itself, to her, and to others? She moaned in doubt, pressing Ark's hand so hard that the bones in hers seemed to touch the bones in his.

Ark, through the sustained high-pressure of her grip, could almost define what she was passing through. "What do you *want* with that young Mowcroft, dear, dear lass?" he murmured within; "what do you want

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with him—*him?*—when scores o' lads even as mere flesh and blood are better over and over again."

As a horse feeding only on hay will turn his head in the stall and, with a half-wild, envious glance, listen to the crunching of corn, so Rollie turned his face to Ark and Meg. His intense gaze looked as though, had he been a steed, he would have broken into a fretful whinny. But, forsooth, being a man, he—laughed. He laughed incongruously loud and long; as if a steed's neigh were affecting the prolonged declensions of some humorous bray.


Because of this, Tom and Tim looked towards Ark for something grotesque. They only saw Ark with his hand on Meg's bent shoulder. They nodded to each other the private opinion that Rollie's laugh was a pretence.

"What's tickling thee?" asked Tim, to cover some of Rollie's hilarity, now ludicrously artificial.

"Pooh!" said Margit, trying to cover her impatience. "The mere thought of a feather sets his gigglin' whirl-a-gig goin' round till it can't stop."

"Well, you see, Margit," answered Rollie, "'twould take a whole live quacking wild goose, flapping with both wings, and scratting with both claws right up the top of your arm, to set even a twinkle of your giggle going."

Then, to make the situation more frankly acknowledged, he called to Ark and Meg, but without looking round from the table, "What are you two mooning and crooning at over there? It's a pity you can't let a single, unsentimental, sensible chap like me get a plain every-day meal's meat without making him think that a couple o' lovey-doves are dovey-loveying so close aback of his lug that he thinks they're going to nest there. If there's one thing I love worse nor making love mysen, it's hearing two other folk making it; an' making it not half as good as I'm sure certain I could make it mysen. *What* are you saying, Margit? Hey? What? Speak out. What are



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you grumblin', mumblin', rumblin', an' tumblin' at the table for, as if you're eating your piece o' pie over again and with words as hot as radish? Isn't she, Tom?"

Margit, to bribe Rollie into silence, thrust another cutting of pie upon his plate, then restlessly glanced at Meg and Ark, partly rose, and sat again.

"When, Tom an' Tim, you two go coorting, just you come to me an' I'll give you a lesson or two. An' if, after a little practice with me, you can't win your lasses, I'll undertake to win 'em for you mysen. I'll undertake that for thee."

"Aye, undertake and maybe *overtake*!" cried Tom.

"True, Tom!" cried Tim, "and maybe *overtake*! You'd cheat us, Rollie."

Rollie winked, roguishly pretending that cheat indeed he would.

"You'd make a good Mormon, Rollie," said Tom.

To this Tim responded, "A *bad* Mormon, Tom."

"Aye, I do believe," playfully confessed Rollie, "they'd have to dip me i' the Salt Lake to cure me into cold bacon if they wanted to keep me from marrying up the whole State. A state o' single cursedness would never keep me alive. I'd emigrate to the angels. If my own shadow had skirts on, I'd wed *it*! I'm a deemon for marryin'."

"Then why don't you do it?" cried Tom.

"An' have done with it!" added Tim.

"Because it's one o' those queer long lanes o' things that when you've done with it, as you call it, you're only just beginning it. An' at the wrong end, too! I'd rather begin at t'other end. I'd sooner marry a home-made wife an' family, ready and complete; an' then climb down the ladder by gettin' rid o' one youngster this year an' another the next. *Then* there'd be a hope of something like quiet and comfort on the hearth. And on the earth, too, in time. But now, bless thee, it's nothing but marryin' twice one till it's twice two, and you have a family

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sum of youngsters i' th' house big enough for a school-master to work on a slate."

"What about Sallie Dootson?" cried Tom.

Tim carried this question more home by adding, "*Aye?* Sallie?"

Meg moved as if to rise. Ark withdrew from her. Margit rose, querulously saying, "Sallie Dootson wouldn't marry Rollie Rondle if she went to her grave unwed!"

Rollie's blue eyes twinkled. He said, with unusual calm, "Wouldn't she? Indeed? This time you're a prophet after your time, Margit, for Sallie married me last week!"

All keenly centred their attention upon Rollie.

"Last week?" cried Margit.

Meg affected not to be waiting for his reply. She even sat again. But she bit her lip. She was trembling.

"Last week," answered Rollie, earnestly. "A-Tuesday."

"Not i' church!" said Margit, with confidence.

"In—Brink-o'-the-Dale—Church. Yon church o'er the road."

"Who gave her away?"

"Thee, Margit. An'—"

"I never, never, *never* did!"

"An' Meg stood th' bridesmaid."

Meg started, thinking thought upon thought.

"I know," cried Ark; "'twere in a dream!"

"Thank the heavens it *were!*" laughed Rollie. "I was never so relieved in all my born life as when I wakened up an' found mysen still all my very own. May I never sleep again if marrying is down the depths of it! I once dreamt that I were dead, and in my coffin. I were far more comfortable dead than married, I can tell thee. Especially when Meg there came an' kissed me. You did, lass! I ought to know. You came an' kissed me in my coffin. An' all the folk



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as I didn't think cared a fly's tear for me were crying Blue Becks an' Merrywain's dams. I thought the Scripturs were being fulfilled with a Flood again, and that I were another Noah, all alone in my little five-foot oak ark, with all the animals two by two looking at me—from the outside."

A moderately merry laugh from all brought back some of the old harmony, and Rollie felt that he had worked to some purpose.

Margit, indeed, thought it advisable that the party should break up upon that good-humor, and by a most subtle upward wink with her lower eyelid to Tom she reduced intelligible human expression to its lowest possible point of action. It was a whisper of the silent eye.

Tom dutifully rose, saying, "Well, if I'm to do my morning turn, I must go to roost."

"An' so must I," followed Tim.

"Good-night, Margit," resumed Tom.

"Good-night, lads," responded Margit. "You're sensible. I like folk as think o' the morning overnight."

"Good-night, Meg," said Tom, continuing this personal process of going because of the restored good feeling after the long strain.

Meg, looking down, only slightly nodded. She was busy thinking of the new situation fast developing by this movement of Tom and Tim.

"Good-night, Ark."

Ark responded with forced cheeriness. His thoughts also were on the new situation. He hoped that Rollie would not leave until Meg went up-stairs, for he knew there was much smothered energy in Margit awaiting expression.

"Good-night, Rollie."

"Good-night, Tom, lad," Rollie almost sang. "I like folk as think o' the night over morning. So I'll stay on a bit."

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Meg, glad of beating a retreat upon the rear of Tom and Tim, said, "I'll go, too. Good-night."

Rollie and Ark might have timed and toned their "Good-night, Meg," by music, so precisely unified were the two earnest expressions. They did indeed wish her good-night—and a better morning.

Margit was defeated of relieving her suppressed energy. She therefore forced herself into the very painful extreme of saying nothing. She settled down as if to pointedly sit Rollie out in dumb show."

"Well, *I* must go as well—soon," remarked Rollie, playing up to Margit's too evident design. He was resolved not to go. He could feel, see, and almost hear that the moment the door shut his own heels out "there'd be the more-than-mighty mischief of a mite-of-a-woman's tongue for Ark; and who could tell what for Meg?"

Margit pretended to yawn, glancing with further diplomacy at one of the ticking clocks on the wall.

Rollie, with much daring wickedness, imitated the yawn of a hungry horse rather than of Margit, took out his thick miner's watch, and muttered as he stared at it, "Aye, I must go—direc'ly."


Ark knew the struggle, and sat mute.

"It's past *our* time," remarked Margit, with a great effort to be easy and patient, for she knew Rollie's trick of being comic and perverse when any one wished to be especially tragic.

"And it's past *ours*," remarked Rollie, with some of the frankness of hypocrisy. "I *must* set out—soon, or Mrs. Dootson will think I'm settling here for the night."

Margit half playfully said, "You wanna do that!"

"N-o," answered Rollie, as affectedly moody as if he were reading destinies in the low fire. "No. . . . No. . . . Oh, no."



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And yet with something of the dreamy repose of a big Cochin-China cock drawing up one leg to begin roosting, Rollie drew up the clogged foot of his left leg over the plump knee of the other, clasping it into position with his hand.

Ark persuasively remarked, "You go to bed, mother."

"I never left a stranger down-stairs, and I never will."

"You can lock an' block all your cupboards an' drawers, Margit, if I'm the stranger you're thinking on. Yon pie were supper *and* breakfast for me. I'm famishing for nought else. In fact, I'm on the move. I'll make tracks . . . in a minute or two. Mrs. Dootson *will* be wild with me! Her will so"—and as if with the sincerest indolence that could not just then be mastered for all the Mrs. Dootsons in the world, he tugged his foot firmer into position over his knee, languidly reiterating, "Wild, her will. Wild."

"An' no wonder!" passionately called Margit as she rose. "You'd sit out and in the patience of a graveyard figure o' stone, to say nought of a living figure o' flesh and blood with every bone tired to death. It's more nor time for you to let us get to our beds, Rollie Rondle. Come! Let me bar the door."

"Hey, good woman, *I'm* no impedimentum bar against barring e'en th' doors of heaven. Bar away. Ark can let *me* out. It doesn't take two for that; does it, lad? You get up-stairs, dear woman. I only want to stay till a bit o' pipity-papity palpitation runs down. It's a thing you can't slow down by flurryin', hurryin', scurryin' like a race-horse."

"It's a queer thing you never had a palpitation inside you before!"

"It's all right, mother," interrupted Ark, feeling that Rollie was working with some secret purpose. "Get to bed. I won't be long."

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"Then I may as well wait," said Margit, sitting again. After a glance at Ark, she suddenly rose, saying, "Well, see as you're *not* long. Good-night."

Rollie watched her enter the staircase, slowly changed the left foot for the right over his knee, and settled down as if about to speak.

Ark secretly glanced at one of the six ticking clocks and settled down to listen.

But Rollie did not speak. Silence itself seemed to wait and listen. Nevertheless, Rollie did not speak.

The six clocks ticked on that waiting silence like rival racers. Then they seemed to get abreast and to tick trottingly with each other. A half-black cinder fell from the fire; and a young cricket, muffled in ashes, seemed to be rehearsing the key-note for a chirp.

Ark changed positions on his chair and waited more expectantly. He himself had nothing to say. Nothing. If Rollie had nothing, what was he staying for?

Rollie put down his foot, stretched his legs, clasped his hands behind his head, tilted backward on the hind-legs of his chair, and, with a twinkle, gazed at a fly walking on the ceiling. He gazed as if estimating whether the insect were big enough to understand the really serious side of this human joke.

At last Ark asked, "What do you want with me, Rollie?"


"Hey, but I *am* tired to-night, lad! Tired out I am." In proof of this he yawned at great length, breadth, and depth. "I'm too fag-lazy to move! I do wish I had my pipe here."

"Do you know the time, lad?"

"Sarah Ann will make stocks of her hands and put my head in 'em."

"Well, say what you want to say. I'm ready."

Rollie relieved his hands from his head. He sat up squarely on his chair. He crossed his knees. Then he



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solemnly said, "I'll make no more nor seventeen shilling this week, lad. Seventeen. And yet a chap is supposed to keep his heart up." He again stretched his legs their full length, crossing them at the ankles. "Supposed—to—keep—his—heart—up," he muttered, slowly closing his eyes.

Again the clocks trotted like elfin-horses through space, the young cricket completed a clearer chirp, and a heavy foot passed down Millgate Lane, leaving the house quieter.

Ark glanced at Rollie for a sign of speech. He both saw and heard Rollie breathe with the impertinent egotism of sound sleep. Ark was amazed. He seemed shut out. His thought was to waken Rollie; his feeling, to let him have his rest. Ark sat patiently waiting—musing of Meg.

But Rollie was not asleep. Fox was never more awake. And yet Rollie's mockery was so like fact that it is doubtful if any man with all his avowed intellect, or any woman with all her reputed instinct, could have discovered that Rollie was on this side of the border of the land of Nod. His lower jaw had dropped, leaving his mouth open with an appearance of barbaric simplicity. His round, full face had even a slumberous look of overglow which Rollie produced by inner force. His clasped fingers twitched. Now and then he sighed as with a most convincing atmosphere of far-off remoteness from contemporary life. Like many other people asleep in a chair, indeed, Rollie had the humiliating aspect of being the dormant fossil of a lower order of prehistoric man, gradually breathing itself back to life after a death-like sleep through ages of human progress and change.

Rollie at last imitated sleep outwardly so well that the imitation sank within. Even sleep itself became a little deluded as to his sincerity or pretence, and fitfully claimed Rollie as its own in mesmerizing lapses of consciousness.

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In that really drowsy state Rollie was vaguely afraid he might speak the whole truth and nothing but the truth to Ark. With dull effort, therefore, he now and then internally roused himself, while outwardly he still looked asleep. Rollie at last deemed it safe to begin business. With drowsy fidelity to the outward speech of dreams, he huskily said, "Seven-teen shill'n' . . . heart up."

Ark thought, "Something is wrong with Rollie and the underground manager?"

"Heart up . . . Sallie . . . heart up."

"Oh, oh!" again mused Ark, feeling unavoidably sly in hearing this. "Low wage—and Sallie Dootson? He's in the same clock-case as myself."

Realizing that Rollie might say something asleep that he would not wish to say awake, Ark shook him.

Rollie muttered, "Right — Sallie — right — wed — June—"

"Wed Sallie in June?" mused Ark. "Then *he's* no thought o' Meg, after all? June? Maybe Mrs. Dootson's been cross with him? I thought he lingered queerly. All right, Rollie lad, you can sleep the night here."

Ark went on tiptoe to the coal-box, lifted a lump of fuel as quietly as if it were a rabbit by the ears, and lowered it into the burned-out hollows of the fire without a sound.

He emptied the clothes-pegs near the door of his overcoat, his mother's red shoulder - shawls, and a jacket of Meg's. Then he packed Rollie as if going on an outside seat by stage-coach to the North Pole. Finally, with a chair between him and the fire in case he fell forward, Rollie looked settled, not for a night only, but for a season.

Ark sat for half an hour as quietly as an angler watching a line. When the rhythmic rise and fall of Rollie's



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chest gave Ark the fullest assurance that the land of Nod was safely reached, and that there was no prospect of the wanderer's return until work-time in the morning—it was then 2 A.M.—Ark took off his boots and crept up-stairs to bed without creaking a board.

Rollie was indeed asleep by this.

Meg was wide awake, but she did not hear Ark. It would have required more than the creaking of a board to have diverted her centred thoughts as she watched the tranquil throbbings of a large star through her garret window. It was so very placid in a far-off peace! How was it that peace always seemed far off? It was so perfectly beautiful within the mystic ring of its own halo! How was it that things at hand—living things—were so imperfect? and anything but beautiful? Look at Margit! Look at—but no, no! It was of little use going over the strange puzzle of Ark again. Tears of perplexity and pity brimmed her eyes. She closed her eyelids and the tears rolled down her cheeks. She was too much a part of those tears even to drive them away—and again she looked at the star. It was like a little "Sacred Heart" she had seen in a picture of the Virgin Mary that had recently perplexed her in a broker's window. Yes, like that pictured "Sacred Heart"; but this had real beams of light, and was throbbing.

Why the "*Sacred Heart*"? And had only women the "Sacred Heart"? She had never seen one on the picture of a man.

With this clashing thought she gazed more intently at the star, her faintly gleaming eyes appearing as if they also were two miniature sacred hearts, and, with the star, the only living things in the night—two finite points and yet related to the infinite, related to the infinite dumb dreams and yearnings of a woman's groping body and soul.

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A thrill ran through her as if some suffusion from all her thoughts had run like a new hot liquid into her blood. She sprang out of the bed as out of a pit and began to dress. She felt like preparing for a long journey—aye, like dressing to go to a far-off tranquil star.

Margit—Ark—Rollie—Tom and Tim—even Owen Mowcroft—nay, the whole of dull Brink-o'-Dale now crowded upon her thoughts with the discomfiting pressure, not of life as a happy, harmonious whole, but of several lives in conflict, nothing quite as she desired—nothing.

But what did she desire? She would like to begin experience again—elsewhere—with others—under less complicated conditions; yes, and without that mute reminder in every Brink-o'-Dale creature she met of the thought that her father and mother had not considered her worth food and shelter; that even her mother had left her to be drowned like one too many in the world. She might have been the child of a stone or a tree for all the clear consciousness of parentage that she had. Perhaps her mother was right. Perhaps this strange, strange world was not the world where her real life could fully live. Perhaps the world of Death was the world for her. But who could tell?

Ark was awake, listening for movements from Rollie below. Instead, he heard movements in Meg's room above—movements touched with the mystery of an effort to be stealthy and quiet—movements on the stairs, like the rustling sounds of the secret migration of a restless soul—sounds that held him as bedfast as if his limbs were broken, and as dumb as if his voice had gone. Was all this some plan with Rollie? He sprang up, sitting. And yet, even if so? He gazed into the darkness, listening. If Meg inclined to Rollie, thank God! It wasn't Mowcroft. Rollie could save her, and true love



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was love, not hate. He sank back, resisting the inner cry of his heart.

Meg stood at the bottom of the stairs, beholding a great shadow reaching from the chair along the floor and into the mouth of the staircase. It sluggishly moved to the flicker of the flames, as if alive. The glow of the unseen flames hidden by Rollie's massed figure made Rollie himself look like some overclothed boggart with a vivid glory around every part of him but his feet.

Meg ascended a step backward. She was not sure. She feared to press her vision upon the vagueness farther, and turned to retreat. Perhaps it was only Rollie? She at once went down. Yes, Rollie—and fast asleep! The sight appealed to her. She put down her fiddle in its green bag, took off her hat, unbuttoned her jacket, opened it for casting it off—but paused. She reached her hat from the door. Nevertheless she did not put it on again. Indeed, as if to put it out of reach of some unreliable Meg within the more sane one then thinking of Margit, Ark, Tom, Tim, Mrs. Dootson, and indeed the whole of Brink-o'-Dale, through a remarkably serious dream-frown on Rollie's face, Meg stepped on tiptoe to the pegs and threw her hat on the highest. She gratefully felt more secure from herself.

Suddenly there was another foot on the stairs—there were voices— even shuffles—Margit passionately saying to Ark, "I'll teach the two on 'em! If it's a flit, *let* them flit. They'll come to their senses by the light o' day!"

Margit caught Meg in the act of twisting her hat off the high peg.

"Get up-stairs now! Quick—run—afore I straight strike you with the sort o' hand you can't take off!" and she pushed Meg towards the staircase.

Meg only half resisted, for she was estimating how long it would take her to get a chair, reach her hat, seize her fiddle, unbolt the door, and make off. To think with

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more freedom, she moved before Margit's pushes into the staircase.

Margit turned to Rollie and roughly stripped away her own shawls and Ark's coat, saying, "Here, lodger, waken your impudence up. Go and wear clothes and burn coals where you pay rent!"

"All—eh—all—right, Mrs. Dootson."

"But it's all wrong with your Mrs. Dootsonin'. Waken up!—and take your impudence home."

"All *right*. All right, Sarah Ann. I'm gettin' up—what the hangman—Margit? Where the deuce am I?"

Meg, as if Rollie awake were somewhat too real compared with Rollie asleep, fled up-stairs. She passed Ark. He called to her; but she hated the sound of his over-anxious voice, and fled to her room, feeling that the old war of the world was resumed.

"Hey, Margit, woman, but you've spoiled a good sleep—one o' the best spells o' nothing an' nowhere th' Almighty ever made out o' th' substance of a man."

He yawned as if transfixed. Margit jerked his head, saying, "Get on to your legs and out o' this."

"Hey, lor', Margit, thanks for yon gentle touch aback o' th' neck. Only for that I'd have gaped mysen inside out. Isn't breakfast ready?"

"Well, did you ever!"

"Or, I'll finish supper if you like—"

"Now don't think you're going to muddle *me* wi' jokin'. I'll tell Sallie Dootson o' this sly work."

"Of wanting breakfast? Hullo, Ark, lad? What time is it?"

"Half-past three—"

"And here's Tom an' Tim, now! It *is* a early-birdie gathering. Only, I see nought of the early worm, Margit."

Margit unbolted the front door as if setting a gun off, saying, "Now, Rollie Rondle—out o' this!"



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"What's happened?" asked Tom.

"Aye, what?" followed Tim.

"Well, you see, Margit has had the nightmare. She has it yet. Nay, she *is* the nightmare, and wants to ride us all out o' this to the land of kingdom-go!"

Like a sheep through a pen, Meg leaped from the staircase, pushed past Tom and Tim, slipped around Ark, ran between Rollie and Margit, and out.

Margit screamed—fainting, helpless. Ark and Rollie rushed out, leaving Tom and Tim to do the best they could.



CHAPTER XV

AN ENCOUNTER


Meg fled for the high-road to Garsbrook. From its elevation she saw far off the wild lights of the night furnaces, flaring and gasping, the white and orange illuminations sweeping both earth and heaven with gaunt, giant ghosts. Half-revealed Garsbrook looked demoniacal in the Titanic forms of lit-up smoke and steam coiling like liberated monsters still tortuous in pangs of heat.

Meg breathlessly hastened for Garsbrook. She hoped to get to some region of the world that she knew absolutely nothing about, where even the hedges would have more variety than merely Brink-o'-Dale thorn—thorn—everlasting thorn—and that grimy.

One of the long broad shafts of Garsbrook furnace-light fell like a silent column of immaterial glow full-length from heaven upon a canal, revealing its locks and boats like the objects of a semi-submarine world within the dip of a greater world of hills, darkness, cloud, and fire. Meg, glad of any suggestion, ran down a long, sloping, narrow, zigzag lane tapering to the tow-path.

All the columns of glow were up the heavens again, leaving the canal too black to even shine; and so on the hollow-sounding tow-path she ran more by faith than by sight.

Quick footsteps were behind. Desperate, she in-



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creased her speed. The footsteps increased their speed—yes, to the same degree—even step for step. Her heart beat within her like a great throbbing wound as she sped along in dread of steps that now seemed on the other tow-path opposite, and now in front of her. She stopped. The footsteps stopped. Meg ran again. The footsteps ran—now on the bank abreast of her.

“Only echoes!” she thought. Nevertheless, she scampered more desperately, with an illogical dread from one of Margit’s odd notions that even echoes were something in addition to herself and might have eyes for seeing in the dark.

A sweeping furnace-light flared with a pause upon a distant group of canal-boats crowded about a lock. All the little stove-pipe funnels were smoking, and from the square mouth of one of the cabins a homely glow was shed upward upon the night. Surely some big, motherly boatwoman could not fail to be in the heat of such a homely glow as that! Meg’s heart warmed towards some ideal social heart. Even that soon she longed to see a face—a woman’s; to hear a voice—a mother’s; to be with some being in addition to that terrifying and impulsive inner Meg of her own.

But she held back—weeping because she did; crying because no conviction within gave her the right to seek a creature, seeing that she had left so many so willing to help at home.

The shouts of Ark and Rollie behind her on each side of the canal thrilled her into action. She ran for the boat with the homely glow, leaped aboard, slipped down the short ladder into the cabin, and was face to face with Owen Mowcroft, as pitifully dirty and soiled as a stayed white pony in pound.

Half dazed from a doze he sprang to his feet, calling, “What’s the—”

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"Hush! Here's Rollie and Ark!"

They listened as if smothered with thick hot air. Heavy determined steps approached and passed—going towards the lock.

"They'd kill us!" she whispered, trying to put into those few words the sorrow and passion that would be Rollie's and Ark's if they found her with him—"kill us, they would."

"I'd like to see them try," he huskily muttered. Owen did not sound very valiant to Meg, or look it either, in his wrinkled collar and cuffs, his face with the aspect of a pocket-worn envelope, and clothes that appeared overwrought by doing all-night service after a very exacting day in country lanes in showery weather.

Meg hated this phase of him; abhorred it; nevertheless, an unutterable sorrow weakened her towards him.

Reading something in his favor in her look, and prompted by a half-sober egotism, he laughed, "So you—couldn't do without me? Hey?"

"Hush! They're there—"

"Well done, Meg!"

Meg whispered: "Will you go back home if I do?"

"No. And I wouldn't let you go if you would. Meg! One; just one!"

Meg turned pale with her most painful realization of the old, old fact that wherever they might be—in church—on the road—in a wood—even in a canal-boat cabin—sooner or later he seemed to think only of gratifying his lips upon hers.

Her eyelids slowly lifted with a dignified poise of her lashes as she looked straight at him with the dark frankness of her shame. But quickly passing this over she asked:

"Why not go home?"

"Because you've come."

"I didn't come for—you."



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"Oh no. Of course not. Girls never do. Never."

An expression of meditated retreat in her eyes caused him to slyly move between Meg and the little ladder. Her hands gripped his jacket front and she whirled him back, bang against the little bunk of a bed. He recovered his balance, caught her half-way up the ladder, and roughly dragged her back. Heavy footsteps on the hollow tow-path struck their desperation mute. They stood as dumb as a tragic group of statuary, but in feverish flesh and blood.

The footsteps passed. Owen's figure in the tragic group stooped with relinquished dignity over Meg—roughly trying, in fact, to make the representation one of comedy.

Meg, however, would enact nothing but tragedy. Owen, therefore, struggled the more for farce, swiftly striving to forcibly resolve all life into a stolen kiss; whereupon Meg struck out with such vehement smartness as to split the mask on Comedy's face; and Tragedy stood victorious, radiant, defiant, and now superior to retreat.

He laughed.

In deep, indignant tones she said: "You're mean. Mean!" And yet her own words almost made her cry.

He independently implied that she now had her liberty, by asking: "Where are you going?"

In the tone of a pettish retort she answered: "With you! You've *caused* it—all of it."

"Nonsense."

"Only for you I'd have—I'd have been hap—"

The word sank a total wreck down an ingulfing deep breath, and tumultuous sobs covered it as if the frail yet daring little craft of speech had never been.

Owen Mowcroft bit his lip in a guilty pity for this over-devoted creature. His pity was extremely annoying just then, and his blue-eyed glance of impatience



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burned almost black as it fiercely looked upon this inconvenient sequel to a dalliance with the only kind of girl worth dallying with. To avoid being harsh of speech he continued to bite his lip, waiting for the crisis to exhaust itself without any compromising help from him. For what could he do? He was down in funds, confound it. Confound everything!

Meg tried to float the wrecked word "happy" even in thought, but the sobs would not let her, and she herself seemed a total loss in the relentless breakers of her own emotion. Her mind had to get clear of the keenest of her feelings, and then to tack with more commonplace ideas as she said:

"Only for you I'd have been satisfied—with home—with everybody—everything! Now I'm not, with *anything—anybody—anywhere!* not even myself—and it's you; *all* you!"

And yet even to her the complaint seemed childish, girlish.

"Confound it," he said, "only for 'only' and but for 'but' wouldn't *I* be satisfied? Wouldn't I? But when—when—I say when you've got a scamp of a father—and a saint of a mother—aye, and a very devil of a sister—what's a fellow— *But I'll—make—him—spin!* I'll lay the villain low! *Low.*"

The pupils of his bloodshot eyes jerked upward, disappearing under the eyelid as when a lantern's focus is swivelled off the white sheet leaving it blank.

This sight startled Meg as something she had seen before, but now made a thousand times worse. She glanced at the ladder, ready, for he appeared to be gazing upward and yet within; into the invisible world of self and yet towards the outer universe beyond man's ordinary ken.

His pupils slid into position again with a wild, vague gaze at the old world. He cried:

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"It isn't worth it! Let's give it up! Why play it out?"

Meg knew this as a despairing cry of life—ringing true to meditations of her own only a few hours before. Was some unknown sway of things seen and unseen bringing their lives to the one solution—death?

"Owen, Owen!" she cried, now entirely on the side of life's dread of the unknown; clinging to him, persuasively holding him from some abyss which he appeared to see with his twisted eyes.

"I'm cursed in this old world. Cursed—in and out. Body and soul!"

"You break my heart—Owen!"

"What's the whole devil's deal worth? The whole trick? Nothing! Why want it? Why have it? Why be stuck like a fly on a pin—and buzz?"

"I'll do anything! What *do* you want? Listen!" she cried, renewing her hold. "Anything in the world—"

He almost shrieked, "They didn't ask me if I wanted to *come* to the sod of an earth. And now I *am* here, the hellish snake hounds—here!—there!—in!—out!—on your head, see!—in your hands—oh, off with them; off! Now I *am* here they won't let me be myself. I have to be a doomed double of that villain at home—and call him father. Father!"

"Hush, Owen, hush; there's a dear fellow—for my sake."

"'Father!'—heavens!"

"Rest—"

"In this infernal—"

Meg put her hand upon his mouth. This increased his frenzy. He growled like a beast, against consolations. "In this infernal hole of the devil's new hell I'm not Owen, not Mowcroft—not mother—but *him!* His blood rushes through—sets me on fire—till every

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finger is smoking brimstone with a devil in every joint. Meg? You here still? Lord! how I love you—”

“Gently, gently.”

“Love you!—I swear it—now—here. Oh, down, down fiends; down fathers, down! Off with my head, then. Take it—crush it—split it—spike it—pound the father out of it—bury it five fathom of flames deep. If those churchyard marble birds peck even a hair of me they’ll turn black and fly drunk into Merrywain’s dam. Love? Love you, Kitty? Pretty Kitty! Witty Kitty! Skitty Kitty! Love you, pretty, witty, skitty Kitty? Love? Oh, like a ten years’ thirst!”

Meg moaned and slowly turned away. She put her foot on the ladder to mount from one world of craziness to another. But in a deepening of his illusion he seized her. She was one of the ghostly creations of his delirium at last made tangible, ready to hand to dash against the walls of the world.

Meg struggled, with shrieks half suppressed by his ill-directed grips about her head and neck, as he muttered like an enraged wolf trying to growl through its foaming pantings.

“I fight—fight devils like you and fail; fight angels in church-windows and fail; fight God visible and invisible in the one Lord Jesus Christ—and fail! Fail, fail!—world without end, I fail.”

“Hush—stop—listen—wait—”

“I wish to heaven beyond heaven seven times seven that all the earth and heaven could fail; all stop; all rest.”

“Rest now. Listen, Owen Mowcroft, oh, do! God have pity, pity!” she cried, as she cast herself upon him with sympathy and despair beyond her words.

In tranquil tones he said as if in prayerful soliloquy:

“Give a soul quiet, dear God. Quiet. *All* quiet. Let God, death, and myself be alone. Not even Christ and the Holy Ghost with us.”

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Meg sobbed, helpless. She felt as if held over the black brink of the world, wishing to fall over it, down, down into nought.

"Nay, dear, dear God, power over all, the All that is all, give me death alone. Nothing but myself and death. No, no. Let death alone be—death everything; everything dead. Nay, nay, Kitty of Mill Stones' hell!" he shouted, brutally squeezing Meg as she cried to be free, "give me fire; let me blaze for it—blaze *out*—and God, devil, woman, and man be damned!"

Meg tried to escape, but he thrust her aside, and with fiendish strength wrenched the little ladder, whirled it against the stove-piping, brought it down smoking, turned over the stove, and stood upon the burning coal: Meg, with shrieks stifled by fright, scrambling dizzy on deck.

She found the boat isolated in mid-stream, and on the two canal tow-paths were black figures hastening with red and green lights.

"Help! help!" she cried, almost reeling over the strip of deck.

"Meg, by Heaven!" shouted Ark at the same time that Rollie moaned "Lor"! What were we thinking of mooring *her* from land?"

"Quick! he's burning himself."

"Men! Haul! Haul to!"

Up the cabin hold scrambled Owen Mowcroft smouldering. Frantically running along the deck, he seized Meg, shouting, "As hell won't take me, to the sea, then, Meg. To the sea, Kitty; and drown this everlasting thirst!" and he leaped with her into the canal.

Rollie and Ark leaped to the water—Ark, deft swimmer as he was, holding up his lantern with one hand like a marine will-o'-the-wisp.

There was a struggle as if between night monsters of the deep. Ark seized Meg. Rollie, with his two hands



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like one, seized Mowcroft. They seemed to mutually grip in a resolve that but awaited death—silent, invincibly interlocked.

The men on the banks ran from bank to boat and boat to bank with poles and ropes. Rollie called, "Help! help!" as if they were his last sounds on the outside of the water, for Mowcroft, half-drowned and raving, gripping Rollie with a delirious perception of revenge, was clogging his action, dragging him down.

Meg, mortally anguished with hopelessness of soul, swamped in grief—grief for itself, grief for others—fatally ashamed—resisting rescue—preferring death—pleaded to Ark to be left to drown.


At last the men so contrived to cast their ropes that they could drag the two struggling pairs to the side where boatwomen with vigorous impatience helped to haul them to the path.

Even there young Mowcroft struggled with Rollie; hoarsely growling blasphemies like some being who had sought doom and was rebellious because it was but half complete.

The boat suddenly flamed upon the darkness like the seat of doom defrauded of its due, and with oaths of self-interest the boatmen and their wives ran to fight the burning trusses of hay belching flame lost in smoke, and smoke lost in flame, as from a floating inferno on the river of death.

The increasing flare, followed by intermittent deep shadowings of smoke, sank into Owen Mowcroft's semi-consciousness like a feeding element of frenzy. He sprang up, tripped Rollie, scampered along the tow-path through a sudden overflow of water, leaped upon a boat, and from that to the boat on fire. With uplifted arms and a wail of triumph he sprang into a column of smoke, and fell down the cabin like a burned-out rocket.

Ark, Rollie, Meg, and the other women and men, had



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to take swift flight up the bank from the mystery of a flood that had a storm-like force. Meg, not knowing what had happened to Owen, continued her flight and made off.

From the bank the others perceived the flaming boat rise like a sentient volcano that had been awaiting its human prey, leap the submerged lock along with the other craft, and make off, lighting its own way upon the black waters which filled the upper banks to the brim, and in some places overflowed with wild relief.

Off the boatmen went in pursuit, seeing the burning craft swept off the canal-track along the flood to their right. Water and fire seemed to be fighting for the prize, and men but followers in the wake.

Crash the boat went against the remnant of a disused factory chimney, bringing it down. The boat escaped, but it whirled as if partaking of the delirium of the distraught soul within. It tilted upon a submerged bank and rolled over, aground in shallow water, and so placed that it received the overflow upon its flames.

The first upon the smoking deck was little Ark. With long boat-hooks he, Rollie, and the men probed the cabin mouth. Out they all drew poor Owen Mowcroft like an effigy still smouldering.

With vigorous forethought they lowered him into deep water, extinguished all signs of smoke, and ran with him to a mill-keeper's lodge close by.

When this crisis was modified by the evidence that Owen Mowcroft was alive enough to blaspheme, Ark and Rollie thought of Meg. The last they could recall was her flight with them from the flood, and they hastened back in search of her.



CHAPTER XVI

WHITHER?

MEG took to flight as if all dangers of fire and flood had been transferred to her. The rival flares of other furnaces were soon contending for her shadow—one flare casting it to her right; another thrusting it to her left; a third flinging it foreshortened behind her; and yet another projecting it like a long black emission of her own spirit in front of her.

Through that artificial twilight of the midnight glare, on she ran. Catching sight of a curving river like the dim brightness of a sabre sheath in the distance, she was attracted to it as the only thing with light in the ominous dun darkness of a storm ahead.

A silvery quiver of lightning broke from the bosom of the black cloud as from the bosom of a black-mailed knight of the air. It flashed downward and entered the river. The thunder moaned as if some slumbering monarch of space had been roused by a wound to wander in search of a quiet place wherein to die; and though there was no rain where Meg ran, she could hear rain and wind like furies searching a wood upon a height not far away.

Before reaching the river, Meg came to cross-roads going off at angles. Hearing the tramp of heavy horses and the rumble of heavy wheels she hid in the shadow of a hedge. As she looked towards the sounds in the darkness, lightning flashed upon the gilded bold carving

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and mirrors of a long line of menagerie caravans. In the first caravan a lion roared, and the modest English hedge vibrated about Meg with the sounds from some African forest. She cringed, afraid to move—afraid even to pulsate too vividly.

The caravans passed like a golden and yellow procession from some wild fairy-land of the night, with its riding women, tramping men, shaggy ponies, and foaming hounds tugging at their chains beneath some of the vans.

Instead of now seeking the river, Meg followed the caravans at a distance for the sake of their alien and yet friendly company as tramps like herself.

But little by little they left her behind, wearied, until she had to halt—again completely alone, with no movement save in the clouds and the trees.

About an hour later a few lighter caravans overtook Meg, with the little red curtains of the little windows illuminated, the lean, hairy horses drowsy, and the drivers on the shafts silent.

On the shaft of one yellow caravan was a red-shawled, dark woman—doubly dark in the night, but with the pulsating red star of a short pipe regularly smoked, lighting the hollow of her hand like a little lantern for her shawled, brooding face.

When level with Meg, the woman called with a thin, sing-song intonation, her last words rising into an interrogative note in the minor—"Gooing faer, lovè?"

Meg was too alarmed to speak.

"How faer, dear'n?"

Meg could only answer, "Miles!" The prospective weariness of them she once more indicated in the *descending* tone of each letter unduly prolonged—*i-l-e-s.*"

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"Then step ye in at the back, dear'n, with the little uns."

With a fearsome gratitude Meg mounted the caravan steps. She heard the laughter of two boys beyond the curtained door. That encouraged her to open it.

Standing on the narrow floor were two lean and lank ragged youngsters with night in their jet-black hair, Indian twilight in their tanned faces, and summer moonlight in the bluish-whites of their eyes and teeth. They stood facing each other, sparring; apparently with an extra head at the end of each arm, for they had boxing-gloves on.

Meg's act caused a suspension of hostilities.

A buxom brunette, in her ordinary day clothes, was on a high, bunk-like bed opposite the door, and leaning over the side like some heavenly arbitrator watching the strife of pygmies. At the sight of Meg she called, "Time! Come in, missie, if you *be* coming in. And shutten out the cold."

Meg shyly sat in the nearest corner by the door. She was about to shut the door, but it was closed as if by magic, leaving revealed in the opposite corner a curious pixy of a being with a young man's long narrow head on a boy's frail body. His wrists and hands had the form and wrinkles of middle age, but the size of the hands of a seven-year-old girl. He seemed very cheery, even happy, crouched up on a child's chair on the caravan seat.

He had been reading a well-thumbed book called *The Royal Book of Dreams*, but this was now held slackly in his girlish hand. Instead, he seemed to be quietly reading Meg.

He was sensationally explained to Meg by a hanging bill near the roof, with a crude portrait engraving, as she read:



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“JOSEPH SHECKLEBOROUGH,

THE MARVEL OF CREATION!

THE DESPAIR OF SCIENCE.

THE PUZZLE OF THE DOCTORS AT HOME AND ABROAD!

THE DOUBLE-JOINTED LIVING SKELETON.

TO BE SEEN ALIVE!”

Meg sensitively glanced to verify this. It was true. An irresistible tear sprang to her eye. At that moment the sparring was as vigorously resumed as if Meg had never entered. The handsome arbitrator on the bunk-bed was aiding the destiny of the smaller youngster by calling :

“Now, Jos, stand-to, shoulders square, hands up, out straight with your lefter—an’ get in! No, no. No swash-swinging; straight-in between Joey’s gloves with your lefter fair on his cob. Then a gasper with your righter on his chest. That’s better! Sly it again, Jos, but straighter. Then you’ll be even on, three, three. *Now*. Ah, you just missed. At him again! But don’t swipe round. Oh, Jos, smother and murder us—no! *No!* Now look here, Jos.”

The dark daughter of battle slid from the bed.

“Gev me a glove. Watch. Now, champion Joey of the road, come on!”

Joey came on. Joey went off again. He reeled from the firm blow of her friendly warfare, right under the bunk; no one enjoying it more than tumbling Joey himself.

The dark daughter of battle remounted the bed as if ascending seraphic heights after performing a miracle.

Jos and Joey faced again—Jos a little nervously, for the vigorous illustration had fired Joey up. In a moment, indeed, Joey’s right hand did to Jos what the young woman’s hand had done to Joey; but with the additional fun of drawing first blood, and poor little Jos

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submitted to fate—which included the brunette's banter—with the most pliable smile that his humiliation would allow.

Meg drew little Jos to her, anxious to stop the blood which he was allowing to drip clear to the floor as if it were as natural as April rain. The young woman called, laughing :

“Why, they just love the love of it, missie! He'll beat Joey into bursted drums at Joey's age.”

Joey called, “I'll bet my black-and-tan he won't!”

“He'll beat you *and* your dog, will Jos, in time.”

Jos showed that he regarded this prophecy as well-founded by a modest but confident shake of his shaggy black head.

The pixy of a being in the corner said, with a piping voice, “Why, Jos will beat you in his sleep, Joey, in time.”

“I'd waken him long weeks before he did,” said Joey.

“But why let them fight at all?” asked Meg, without looking up, and drawing Jos closer to her.

“It's clear you've been weathered in a stone house, missie,” called the brunette. “On the road you do as the road do. We fight for fun. We fun again to fight. *We* do. Have you a silver shillin', missie, and I'll tell you *your* fight?”

Meg was startled, afraid.

“You've a face with something worth hearing. There's a young man. Two. I'm not sure if there mayn't be three. Come here, and open you hand, missie, with something in the middle of it to please the white fairy, or I'll not be able to tell.”

Meg blushed against her will.

“And who's true to you; and who's false to two. *One* is—eh—fair.”

Meg looked up surprised, expectant. But she was more afraid than before.

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"You see I know, dear'n. *I* know."

"I don't want *any* of them!" said Meg, peevish with this following up of fate.

"It's not what you want—now. It's what you'll gev your head for—then."

"When?"

"Now come, let me eye your hand."

Meg did not move, and yet she trembled. She felt cooped in with oppressive mysteries.

The oracle continued with relentless prophecy:

"The journey you're going is a long one. I see it. You will hear strange languages. Some you will understand; some you will not. There's a dark man ahead. But I see no more. Bring me your hand, and cross it, and the fairy may let me."

But Meg did not stir. She was too afraid to think or even feel clearly. All was tremulous conflict within and without.

"Do I tell true or false, friend?" the dark oracle asked the pixy of a being in the corner.

He, like another oracle, with a curious, half-human, half-animal, and yet supernatural significance, as if he had instincts for unearthly things, slowly answered, "*True.*"

Meg's skin wrinkled upon her back like a garment of chilling gossamer webs. A dread of knowing anything at all blocked her helpless in her place. But in a moment a greater dread of not knowing took her to the bedside.

The oracle still reclined as her tanned hands slanted Meg's palm towards a lamp. The dark eyes looked on.

"You *must* please the white fairy with a white offering, missie. Silver."

While Meg was cautiously fingering out sixpence from the money she did not wish to bring from her pocket, the two youngsters again began sparring between Meg and the door.

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"Now, mischiefs, hold off a bit!" called the oracle. They held off. She wet her little finger, and, muttering, made the sign of the cross on Meg's palm, repeating the sign with the coin, which she cast into her mouth. The youngsters resumed fighting, but as if on tiptoe.

"You've a full heart, dear'n. Tender but proud. Proud. You've had more lads than lasses to like you. And more sweethearts than friends."

"Oh no!" protested Meg.

"Do *you* know or do *I*, missie?"

"But—"

"Now wait. *You* can't spy the sly sweetheart from the open friend. If the dove don't croo, you can't tell him from a daw."

Meg sighed over this well-depicted abyss of her own vagueness. The oracle suddenly became more mysterious to Meg by introducing snatches of unexplained gypsy speech.

"You'll hev sweethearts to throw away on three or four lasses. Every man will be *your* soobri. Will you rapscallions hold off there!"

The lads reduced their sparring to the mere dumb show of fighting, by leisurely tapping each other as silently as they could with one hand.

"You'd pity too much. You won't be won by John because you're sorry for Jack. You won't let James, because you pity Jim. But you've a heap of fighting pride, my Gothlin. But take care. That pride might kill that pity—then where'd be John or Jack? A shillin' an' I'll tell you more. Will you two fighting-cocks hold down there! Listen, dear'n, to this, though I can tell you *more*. If you *love*, love and don't care. If I took to good little chap Sheckleborough there I'd *take* to him, and stick my pride with horse-shoe nails to that. See? *Now* please the white fairy, dear'n."



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The two lads bounced with such compound concussion against Meg that the spell of prophecy was broken. The gypsy sprang from the bed, seized the jacket collar of each interlocked combatant and passionately battered them to get them apart. But in vain. Little Jos, at the highest pitch of rage, was crying and cursing, kicking and thumping. Joey, desperately on the defensive, held him more closely than if he loved him; while the pixy of a being on the child's chair was giggling as if he would shake his skeleton loose.

"Well, of all the demnition terriers, cats, and rats!" cried the gypsy, partly delighted as she held aloof to see them both struggling down among the pots and pans, their four legs sending everything flying—whereupon Meg flung open the door, leaped from the top step, and ran to the darkest shadow of a hedge, hiding, panting.

When dawn began to cloudily consider whether or not to break, Meg resumed her journey.

She entered a quaint, straggling place, with lasses, scarlet-shawled and brass-clogged, pattering their way towards a large mill on the main road.

Even so early, in the central grassed angle of the place stood three dingy covered wagonettes, with horses too big in the bone and too lean in the flanks. One was the Browend 'bus, one the Green Man 'bus, and the other the 'bus for Windy Mow.

They stood opposite an inn, with the aspect, in wagonette, horse, and man, of being specially equipped to take hopeless people an hour's ride to Doomsday, just then gloomily dawning.

Meg selected the Browend 'bus because women only were in it. She wondered, with a new consciousness, why she had selected the one with the women only.

Seated by a big motherly woman, with two bigger *women* opposite, their laps packed with baskets and

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parcels, Meg saw things as if each thing were in isolation—without sequence—each woman and each parcel without justifying connection with anything else in the world. She wondered about the why and wherefore of everything and everybody. What was Time itself for? What was that particular morning for? Was there no place in the world where there was nothing but nothing?

The thought puzzled her the more as the three women talked with severe sadness about "a fair brute of a man."

"My sakes, Eliza, if he has put six feet deep o' water betwix him an' his o'er-ridden wife an' childer, they'll on'y miss him for their good."

"Man again!" sighed Meg. One of the women opposite suddenly asked her, "Hasta any Aunt Sarah at Broo-end, lass?"

Meg shook her head. The 'bus started, and she was glad.

"I know a near neighbor lookin' out for a niece like to thee, these two days. Haply thar't goin' to Broo-end friends?"

Again Meg shook her head. Of what use were questions? Of what use were answers? She never again wanted to be troubled with anything or anybody. Only one wish vaguely haunted her, and that was a dreamy wish to sleep. She closed her eyes. But a dread of all the strangeness she was jolting into would not let her fully yield.

At Browend the 'bus stopped opposite an inn called "Wait a Minute."

The name surprised Meg as with some half-human injunction, and caused her to hasten the more through drowsy little rural Browend. At the last little shop door a newspaper placard impressed upon her the fact that there had been a "Brutal Wife Murder." Because of that, she hastened towards the open country, feeling



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that there was no place on earth without something terrible between women and men.

Late that night Meg entered the little town of Bingleton with its lit-up square factories, working overtime, reflected in the intersecting canals like Oriental palaces of dreams rather than mills with the whir of weavers' wheels vibrating even the outer walls as she passed.

On a little sign-board over a door by the light of a lamp she read, "TOM DUCKINWORTH, KNOCKER-UP," and on a card in the window, "BED FOR SINGLE YOUNG WOMAN." Meg knew that a knocker-up performed the innocent duty of calling factory-hands in the morning, and she decided to ask about the bed.

The door was opened by a crooked granny of a woman. The kitchen wall in sight was terraced by rows of little square bird-cages; and two terrier pups ambled to the door-mat, followed by their watchful mother. The little place seemed to have too many lodgers already. Meg was making an excuse to get away when one of the women of the Browend 'bus came from the fireplace, and, as if she had known Meg for years, took her by the hand, urging her in.

The homely fragrance of coffee was an assurance on the side of good-will; nevertheless Meg was not sure of the curious cage of a place, and only sat upon half of the chair near the window. The mother terrier at once leaped upon her lap and coiled into comfort there with an impertinent familiarity.

"Well! Look at that, Mrs. Crowther! Spot thinks the wench is *our* one come back! What's thy name, lass, an' arta seeking lodgings?"

Meg had a most elaborate, half-false explanation ready, but kept it back—and the old woman answered a knock at the door.

"Two smart ones; reg'lar teasers, Granny!" appealed *the husky* voice of a man out of sight.



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Granny took from him a small empty rat-cage. She placed it on the floor while she reached a thick worsted stocking and drew it over her hand and up her arm. From a closet under the stairs she brought a long wire-cage, restless with squeaking rats. Unfastening a small lid, she thrust in her stockinged hand, hunting for the largest, which she leisurely transferred to the man's trap: the tranquillity of the terrier on Meg's knee proving that it was too common an occurrence to make any fuss about. The second rat was transferred, and the man went off with his purchase.

Meg rose. She said she wasn't well—she had made a mistake—it was the wrong house. But Granny assuringly patted Meg's shoulder with the stockinged hand. Uncontrollable tears of terror burst from Meg, and she moved to the door.

"It's all right, my lass," said the other woman. "Granny here's as good as new gould."

"Of course I am. Varmints are varmints; but wenches are wenches, an' I wouldn't hurt *thee* for ought i' all th' wide world. It's on'y business. Business, that's all. Sit thee down, I've a bed as my own daughter slept in; an' tha can hev a sup o' coffee and cake to begin with, now."

Meg stayed, after all.



CHAPTER XVII

AN IMPULSE AT LAST

A NOISY fair had pitched its gaudy, gilded tents, with their big drums, organs, and trumpets, on a large, triangular space of ground. Between the flappings of red and blue blankets of dyer's cloth, fitful peeps could be caught of a beautiful dale that undulated away to the hills and the clouds.

At night the space seemed to be a demoniacal quarter where sound was murdering silence; where light was killing darkness by scorching it with paraffin flames that shot out into space as if to lick the darkness up. Drums, whistles, organs, trumpets, fog-horns, gongs, cymbals, and the lusty, husky voices of funnel-necked men, made the air itself seem mad. Away down the quiet dale, indeed, the sound of all the sounds could be heard like the collective shriek of a town insane.

Meg entered when the fair was at its height. At the first booth a voluble show-man was shouting, "Walk up, walk up! This way for the greatest wonder of the world, the marvel of creation, the double-jointed skeleton, living and breathing, the only bones that walk and talk" (r-rum, drum, drum).

Meg, with a pang, passed to the next booth. She heard a still hoarser voice shouting, "This way; this way! This way for the lady of science, the belle of the ring, the gentle creature who will try the gloves with any man in the fair. This way to see a set-to between Ned



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the Knuckler and Tom the Tickler, the double-handed toucher of the eyelash. Just about to begin! Walk in, walk in! Only a penny for the finest exhibition of the noble art of self-defence, in which the lady-boxer will show any fighting man in the fair what side of his head his face is on. The only female fighter in the world! Hold up the door there, and let the company see her manly form. Look at her! The belle of the ring. Heenan in petticoats; the lady Tom Sayers. The female Roman gladiator and Julia Cæsar all in one. Walk in, walk in!"

The company crushed in; but Meg passed on.

Between the other flaring booths, that were noisy, crowded, and gaudy, was a dingy, ill-lighted menagerie caravan on four wheels. A tattered length of an old ship's sail between the fore wheels of the caravan and the side of the next booth acted as a door. It flapped upon unfathomable dark mystery beyond; and the dingy caravan itself was an oblong of shadow, saved from being total darkness by a small ship's lamp hanging from a hook.

The lamp shed its pallor on a ragged boy of twelve, standing guard at the flapping canvas door. With both hands hollow to his mouth he was shouting with all his strength. But he was not heard. He beat a stick on the torn skin of a kettle-drum. But in that babble of more brutal sounds it was like hitting silence. You could see the stick strike the drum, but you could no more hear the result than you can hear the clashing of swords in a picture.

Soon the lad was not only shouting and beating his drum, but crying with failure. When Meg saw that, she moved near enough to hear him. She then saw a worn oil portrait of a shaggy-haired young woman under the ship's lamp. Seeing that Meg was lured, the little fellow beat his drum harder and shouted with more

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vigor. She could just hear his strengthened voice call :

“This way for the lion-headed woman ; for the lion-headed woman, this way, this way ! This way for the lion-headed woman ; for the lion-headed woman, this way, this way !”

Meg was touched. To help to make an audience for him, she paid her penny. He lifted the canvas door as if lifting the gates of heaven ; he was so glad. She went inside. But no one followed.

A paraffine lamp hanging from a canvas awning showed that the caravan was an old menagerie cage divided into twelve compartments. But only four specimens inhabited the little haunted houses of iron bars.

A famished Tasmanian devil no sooner saw Meg than it dogged to and fro, jerked its eager head forward, and thrust its inquiring nostrils between the bars. A monkey on the top row mounted the bars with the same urgency to get nearer, and thrust out the full length of its lean arm. Two dirty-feathered young pigeons flapped squealing to the bars of another compartment. The fourth specimen was a wild white cat that had undoubtedly been the size of two, but was gradually being reduced to the size of one and turning black in the process. It had a yearning for the wild woods in its enormous eyes that made Meg grateful to the iron bars which stood between her and its claws.

Opposite the cage was a long sheet of canvas with a slit in it suggestive of an exit. Meg waited in the dim place, but nobody came. Beyond the slit in the canvas she heard the feeble falsetto voice of a very young child ; and just as Meg turned inquiringly that way, a pale eager face was being pressed through the slit in the canvas to eye her. The face then vanished like a vision surprised.

In a few minutes there came from behind the canvas

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the slender worn figure of a young woman. Her pale hands were hastily buttoning her dress. She was very weak, unfit to be about. To Meg's pitying amazement, without a word, the creature let loose her great mass of mane-like hair, and stood on exhibition. In a trembling monotone she began :

"I was born in a village in Cornwall. My father was a miner; my mother—"

Meg cried out, "Oh, never mind! Don't trouble! You are two ill. Don't trouble for *me*." For answer the creature's hands drew two veiling masses of her hair over her face and she bent her head, crying. Meg forgot all about the phenomenal growth of grizzly hair that stood out from the pale brow and swept like a mane over one side of the little head, and down below the elbow. She thought only of the worn tenderness of the face, the tearful knowledge of the world in the eyes which were buried beneath the hands and hair—and patted her shoulder. That made the creature worse. Meg stroked the great wave of hair at the crown, and tried to control the grief. The hands slackened, and the hair was swept back from a face that was now a sorrow older; and the young woman turned aside to anxiously peep through the slit.

The cry of the child came through the slit, and she left Meg to the Tasmanian devil, the monkey, the pigeons, the wild-cat, and the sound-muffled shout of the boy, "This way for the lion-headed woman. For the lion-headed woman, this way, this way!"

Meg fervently hoped that nobody would hear the lad's call. The poor creature was human, a woman, a mother—and yet there she was, thought Meg, caged for exhibition like the famished Tasmanian devil, the hungry monkey, the starving cat; yes, and with something of the trembling pigeons about her too.

The cry of the baby became worse. Nothing that the

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mother said or did seemed able to reach the depths of its convulsive sorrow. The distress and the wooing mutterings of the mother drew Meg to the canvas. She looked through the slit. The child had been taken out of a straw-lined grocer's box on the ground, and was crying even at the mother's breast, as she sat like an Oriental on a shredded square of cocoa-nut matting in a dimly-lit gypsy's tent.

Meg asked about the little one. The mother shook her head without looking up. She appeared bewildered. She again pressed the baby to her, and still it cried with breath-drawn gaspings—nothing, nothing seemed to do; and the mother, with her hands to her brow, and her face turned up towards the top of the tent, like a convulsed baby herself, plaintively called, "Charlie! Charlie!"

Meg thought she was calling the boy, and moved to bring him.

"No, no. I wasn't thinking. Charlie's—I forgot—I'm crazed. The little one's pining; pining for want, she is," and utterly breaking down as she bent over the crying little form, she confessed, "and its own mother has nothing in her breasts to give!"

Meg rushed out, dragged in the boy from his drum, sent him for milk, a loaf, and anything else he liked to buy. He went as though some supernatural being had sent him on a mission. He was soon back. To Meg's astonishment, the first thing he did was to put down the stores near the cage, mount a ladder, throw in some un-boiled fair-peas to the pigeons, some nuts to the monkey, and was giving part of the milk to the wild-cat, when Meg hastened him with the stores to the inner tent. Buoyantly telling what he had just done, he poured the milk into a pan over a fire between four bricks.

"And now, mother, that's for me and you and us two!" said he, circumnavigating a loaf with a knife; and



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Meg, much too keenly pained to stand watching their ravenous relief, rushed out and took a sorrowfully dreamy walk round the fair.

When she returned, the boy was on the ladder, holding a familiar conversation with the pigeons and the monkey, with an occasional friendly aside for the Tasmanian devil and the cat.

He quite incidentally told Meg that the baby had dropped off, and by a jerk of his head indicated that as she had so freely paid her footing she need not hesitate to go and see.

Meg did hesitate, however. He announced her by calling from the top of the ladder, "Mother! she *is* back!" The face again appeared at the slit.

"See," the mother said, with gratitude, as she widened the opening so that Meg could view the baby asleep in its box.

Meg's impression was that it was dead. She stepped inside to see it closer. No, it was asleep.

"We have such a place for any one to see!" she said, folding a sack and suggestively placing it like a cushion on the end of a trunk. Meg sat there. Meg thought the creature would take her usual place on the matting by the baby's box; but she again stood as if on exhibition—her eyes perfectly frank, her pale face grave, and her lips ready to confide. Her hair was bound within its narrowest possible compass by a band, but such was its strength that it rose like a bar around the semicircle of her brow and temples, and then swept down in a confined yet broad mass over one shoulder.

Tears flowed in advance of her words as she thanked Meg for what had been done, while she leaned against the trunk, moved away, walked to and fro in restless gratitude. At last she took her natural place on the matting, with her elbow on the box to support her head.



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Little by little she told Meg that "Charlie," her husband, had been the well-known six-dagger juggler. That was before he married her, when he was well up. But a stiffness came to his arms, juggling was out of the question, and he took to sword-swallowing. That was how she met him. He took ill—something in his throat—and he died in hospital; and *she* was not for long. That was how she, Richie, and the baby and the specimens were left. It was hard lines, for he was teaching little Richie to juggle and tumble so clever. "But as for baby here, I'd sooner take her with me than leave her to be a 'show' girl."


A gust of wind blew open one of the folds of her little tent, and Meg and she simultaneously looked through the gap. A crescent was rising in a steel blue sky over the dale, and very little away from the arms of the crescent was a faint miniature star.

"Yes!" the frail mother added, with deep emotion. "I'd sooner us both be in heaven like *that*, than for her to be what I have been."

Then there came through the gap the hurly-burly pandemonium sound of the fair. That represented the world, and the woman hid her face.

Meg bent over her, almost demanding "What can I do for you?" Failing to appease her, Meg in secret supplication cried, "Oh God! teach me! What can I do?" and bent her head in a sorrow for the sorrow of the other. It was a sorrow so deep that it was like a new world to Meg, and she like a new being within it. Her brain glowed with compassionate thoughts. One thought so thrilled her that she murmured nervously to herself. She looked up. She looked around. Suddenly she dropped upon one knee. Off came her boot, off her stocking. "See! See!" she cried. "Would people come to see this?"

The young mother looked down at the scarlet foot.



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"Richie!" she called. "Richie! Run for Rochdale Bob. Tell him to come, *now*. And you'd show it?"

"If it will help."

"God in heaven is good!"

CHAPTER XVIII

AN INTRODUCTION

In the front of him, Rochdale Bob was a reasonable being. At the back, he might have been a young hippopotamus. In profile he seemed to change his nature altogether and to become a combination from the kingdom of vegetables — his head, turnip sprouting with two or three curly tufts; his body, phenomenal first prize marrow; his legs, giant beets to the knee-breeches' buckle; and below, two shapely melons growing out of his massive boots. The surprise was that with it all, in the front he was a reasonable man.

"Oh, aye," he said, quietly viewing the phenomenon of Meg's foot. "It 'll make a show. But it 'll *want* making. You don't get the Johnnies and Janies in by holding up your finger; nor your foot either. It 'll want the showman. It 'll want shouting. *I'll* shout it—but you must go halves. Do as you've a mind between your two selves; but my price is halves."

The lion-headed little woman nodded.

"But she'll want dollifying-up a bit," remarked Rochdale Bob as frankly as if Meg were out of hearing. Without looking at her, he added, "I see she's facesome as well as footsome — and, prop'ly dollified, she'll bring the Johnnies twice. *Have* you a show dress for her?"

"N—o, Bob."

"Look at that! Well, I don't mind lending one, five shillin' the fair," and, turning to Meg, he added still in

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purely business tones, "You *must* trick-up a bit of a dizzle-dazzle, you know. Dollify-up! Curly-wirl your hair. Or you'll have the mill lasses thinkin' you're no dandier than 'emselves. And when you *are* on the box, look smiles; as if you mean the lads to come roaming round you more than once. They're taken with a brown eye rolling in the white like a boat in the surf; so roll. *I'll* bring the show-dress; and *you* transmugrify. Give her a finishing hand at it, Liza. There's trick in every trade—and two to one in ours; and I don't want to take you up and shout myself inside out for nothing. She needn't red-raddle—hey, Liza? You'd only hide good color with bad. But by Irish snakes!—tell me, the pink foot is real? No trick? Was you born it?"

"Yes."

"Born it?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll play the sponge and towel. Not one in two thousand Johnnies will try the rub; but they'll believe it all the more. And what do they call you, lass?"

"Meg. But—I'd rather—"

"Oh you needn't flurry and flinch. We've no Megs or Mags in shows—hey, Liza? Liza here isn't Liza in front of the lights; and you won't be Meg. You'll be Clementyna! Aretheusia! or Susiannamaria! See? But leave that to me. You needn't fear. When you hear me give all your pedigrees and regimentals at the booth front, you yourself won't know yourself. Of course a double show, girls. A double show. The Lion-headed Woman and the Pink-footed Maid. No. That hasn't the color enough. The Red-footed— No. The Crimson-footed— No. Not half strong enough. The Blood-footed Maid!"

"No, no!" appealed Meg.

"That's the *Show*. That's part of the pedigree and regimentals. You fall in."



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"Bob knows," feebly argued the frail lion-headed mother, afraid of the great transaction falling through.


Because of her, Meg was dumb; but the shame flushed her cheeks to the keen scarlet color of her still exposed foot.

"A double show. Both on the box at once. No turns. I'll widen the space by double, rig-up the box here—so—five foot high—and you'll mount by planks behind a curtain at the back. I'll bring some green-baize—and the show dress—and we'll start. We've a couple of hours. *We'll* tickle the fair up, you bet!"

Within half-an-hour Rochdale Bob had three naphtha lamps flaring away the gloom from the caravan front.

Mounted on a barrel near the canvas door, with his strong right arm he brought down a drum-stick like a short sledge-hammer on a drum hanging from his neck. In his left hand he whirred a fire-alarm rattle; and with a humorous semi-ventriloquial fine piping soprano call of Ri-too-la-roo-la-lal-a-lee, such as you would never have associated with his bass-pipe neck, he easily drafted dozens of recruits from the ranks at the booths on his right and left.

"Ladies! Gentlemen!" he shouted, and Meg could hear every word in the private little tent at the back. "Ladies! Gentlemen! Something new! Something new! Never seen in this country before; never exhibited in the United Kingdom of England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, the Isle of Man, or any of the other British Isles at home or abroad; never submitted to the public gaze and the natural curiosity of the people of Great Britain until now. To-night, for the very first time in creation, ladies and gentlemen, will be submitted to your kind notice and attention, Desdemona Maritana, the Blood-footed Beauty from the Rocky Mountains of America. (Meg, in the back tent, shuddered.) Mark me, ladies and gentlemen, I say the *Blood-footed Beau-*



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ty—the marvellous and miraculous natural freak of Nature ; the only case of its kind ; the object of wonder and interest to the greatest physicians, surgeons, doctors, medical men, professors of science, and masters of art, in the whole of the United States of America, Canada, Australia, and the Republic of Mexico and Timbuctoo. The Blood-footed Beauty from the Rocky Mountains of the far West ! Some of you ladies will call it a birth-mark ; some of you gentlemen will think it only a scald ; some of you, I dare say, may even think it nothing but paint. Ladies ! Gentlemen ! Gentlemen—*and*—ladies ! I know what I am saying, *and* I say what I know when I pronounce this human foot a miracle—a marvel—a phenomenal freak of Nature—one of the puzzles of Providence—the Ninth Wonder of the World ! Come and see it—touch it—test it. We encourage inquiry, we invite any doctor, any medical gentleman, any professor of science, any master of art, who may be present in the company before me, to pass in free and fully examine this phenomenal freak in the open eye of the public ; to scrutinize this blood-stained foot even with a microscope, pass his judgment, and tell the general company what he honestly thinks—whether it is the work of the Almighty, a touch of the devil, the fault of woman or man, the revenge of a ghost or beast, or the deadly lick of the well-known Vampire of the Rockies !”

Knowing that Meg could hear all this, the show-man for her sake hastened to add :

“ *But*—but, I say, whatever you may or may not think of Desdemona Maritana’s foot, gentlemen ; whatever you may think of her foot or not think of it, you can only come to one conclusion about the Desdemona Maritana’s face. Boys ! it’s the handsomest face in the fair. I repeat it ! The handsomest face in the fair. The face alone is worth the money ; and if after this novel exhibition is over there’s any young spark not satisfied I’ll

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give him back his money to go and buy himself a wooden doll. And now, ladies and gentlemen, how much to see this Blood-footed Beauty from the Rocky Mountains of America? How much? Not sixpence, gentlemen; not threepence, ladies; not twopence, my friends—the sum of one penny will pass you in. Hold hard, gents. Not yet. For let me tell you that this is not a one-horse show. You will also see, for the sum of the one same penny, the Lion-headed Lady from the jungles of Africa—a lady with a lion's mane, nothing less than a real animal mane, ladies and gentlemen, that has puzzled the greatest scientifics of the day. Now, for the Blood-footed Beauty and the Lion-headed Lady from the jungles of Africa, only one penny. Walk in! Thank you, sir. Thank you, miss. Only one penny for the two greatest natural miracles and phenomenon phenomenon of the nineteenth century. Thank you, good lady; go well to the front. Now friends, hold back there! Steady, steady; I haven't six hands, or I'd be on show myself. One at a time! Room for all. Plenty of room. *One* at a time, boys. Ho, ho, there! Tommy, lad!"

"Aye, Bob?"

"Just sweep in the pennies from some of these young gents fighting for front seats in the dress-circle, and won't give the ladies a chance. Plenty of room, girls. Back places as good as front. Better. Hi! Youngster! Come back. It's a *penny* show. Another bronze! Right you are! You'll come out more honest than you tried to get in. Straight in, mother; nursing-room for the babs; but if she squalls—two-pound-ten a shriek. Room for a dozen more yet; *one* dozen only—for six more—only six. Pack up into the corners there, boys! Room for one *more* dozen. Plenty of room. Push in! Now for six more. Only six—do stand close into the corners there, mates! Confound it! You don't want drawing-room room for your blessed penny! That's better.

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Comfortable room for another baker's dozen, ladies and gentlemen. Pass in — push forward — more room ; but on the thirteenth man, woman, or child, down comes the cloth—and the show 'll begin. Get back, my lad ; no little brothers on shoulders here."

"Not at half-price?"

"Shoulder him in, then ! Ho, ho, there, you gents inside next to the box—don't be sprawling out your backs as if you're playing leap-frog—close in—it ain't a grocer's counter. *Do* tighten the ranks, ladies and gentlemen, we want a good house for the first. *Don't* be selfish—*do* give the friends waiting outside a chance. Room for one more dozen ! Twelve more, and the show *does* begin—six more—four more—two—one ! Right ! Full ! Hold the cloth down Tommy with your hands and teeth."

The showman hastened between the two caravans to the back.

He found Meg convulsed in tears, helplessly trembling, in her sky - blue silk dress trimmed with deep yellow needle-work, large-eyed and coarse, stretching bridge-like from the bold pier of one bare shoulder to another. The needle-work also circled the short sleeves about her elbows ; circled the slack bodice at the waist ; circled each of the three flounces ; and, finally, more fully than anywhere, circled the circuitous rim of the rather long skirt which hid her white-slippered foot. Meg felt that she looked grotesque, and the brutal buzz and hum beyond the canvas made her nerves vibrate as if they were wires ; and at the sight of the showman she sobbed.

"Oh hang heav'n and all !" he lowly muttered ; "don't go and stick us fast with a bit of show fright when there's eight good shilling in the house, and ten more outside ! Swing to, and I'll give you five extra for yourself. Swing to. Brick yourself up hard, miss, and be ready ; or they'll have the canvas in rags and the caravan in chips. *Just think of the mother and babs as you did at first.*"

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At that Meg looked up. Bravery and goodness were upon her face.

"Bravo! I'll go on and dally 'em a bit to give you a breath."

He mounted the slanting planks, drew aside the canvas, stepped upon the green-baized platform of boxes, and doffing his sealskin cap and pretending to breathe heavily, he said very slowly and in marked kindly tones:

"Ladies and gentlemen, as this is the first occasion for me to have the honor and pleasure of introducing to the British public the curious natural phenomenon of Desdemona Maritana, the Blood-footed Maid from the Rocky Mountains of America, I hope you will do me the kind favor when you have seen this wonder of Nature for yourselves with your own eyes—I hope, I say, you will do me the kind favor to recommend the exhibition to your friends outside and at home. I thank you for your kind patronage, and now (here he spoke loudly in the direction of the screen) without—one—moment's—more—delay—I carry out my promise. Now ladies!" he called pleasantly, and lifted the canvas.

The pale lion-headed lady, as the practised professional, led the way up the planks, turning at the critical point of the top to give Meg an encouraging hand of introduction. She led her towards the two chairs near the front of the little platform.

There was a justifiable murmur of awe at the grewsome sight of the massive mane of hair; but this was soon followed by a buzz of happier curiosity as Meg's much pleasanter presence was realized.

"Ladies and gentlemen, as this is the first time Desdemona Maritana from America has appeared before the public of Great Britain, may I ask you to kindly show that you welcome her to our country with a right good English clap," and Rochdale Bob himself generously set



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the welcome going with hands that were nicely plump for the making of loud applause.

Meg felt as if swinging on her chair, dizzy with sudden dips into the hot depths of shame—a new shame that was deepened unaccountable fathoms when the showman pleasantly called upon her to favor the ladies and gentlemen present by letting them see the marvel for themselves.

As in a blurred dream of action Meg tipped off the hidden slipper and raised her dress to the ankle.

All the faces strained forward like some new order of animal life just called into being from out of the shoulders of the throng crushing to gaze upon a foot certainly very novel in its semitransparent carnation tone.

Meg shut her eyes, hoping also to shut every other sense; forcing herself to bear up; trying to think of nothing but the child crying in the box at the back.

But it was a sore fight between the will and the nerves, for with her eyes still closed, she felt strange fingers and thumbs touch her foot—and she thrilled, now fevered and now chilled. She felt the breathings from both mouth and nostril play like the foreign breath of beasts upon her flesh—and she was fain to swoon. She heard women's murmurs of surprise, men's open surmises and guesses; even aside comments upon her face.

With eyes closed the firmer, she felt a man's cold hand lift her foot, testingly finger it, and put it down. She herself felt as if the foot were something inhuman, living in separation from her, a mystery to be given up. Then a hand unpleasantly hot lifted the foot. Still she had to endure. She heard a chuckle. Nay, she felt the chuckle pass into the hand holding her foot. Something animal-like, something grewsomely warm and soft, touched the instep. It was a kiss—and a general holiday roar of approval startled Meg.

Six other young fellows were eager to follow the good

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example. But Rochdale Bob said, "No, no, friends; fair do's; but I'm glad you're so highly pleased. Is there any medical gentleman, or professor of science, or master of art in the kind company who would like to come forward to test the wonder for himself? Here's sponge, water, soap, and towel, for the use of any medical gentleman who will do me the favor to test it for himself before the company. No? Well, nothing can be fairer. I made the offer, and no medical gentleman doubts my word enough to come forward and test in the name of the public. And now, ladies and gentlemen, as this *is* the young lady's very first appearance in this country, and any of you *would* like to show a little appreciation all for herself, *may* I ask you to give an extra coin in this hat and then hand it to the lady yourself? Bless my life and soul! to show there's no animosity and that we're all friends, I'll start the club. There's one—two—three. No, hang me! There's four—five—six—six good pennies of the reign of our sovereign lady Queen Victoria to make a friendly start. All for the lady's own self—*if* you *please*—pass round the hat. Oh, ho? a lady first! Thank you *kindly*, miss. A sister feeling makes us very kind, as one of the greatest historians in the English lang— Pass it round. Thank you. I knew there was a gentleman or two in the company, though I'm sorry to see some have to go to catch the Bingleton 'bus to rush to the bank for small change. Ah, well, if you're all done—yes, pass up the hat to the lady yourself, sir."

Meg, with the first feeling of beggary in her life, hardly knew how to take the alms. Only the pitiful thought of the frail mother and child taught her how.

"Thank you, one and all," said Rochdale Bob, and the place emptied as suddenly as the nest of a family of dormice taken by surprise.

"You've pulled it through tip-top!" said the showman, as they were descending the planks to the back.



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"I'm for the front. Ten minutes and we show again! Would you both like—a refresher?"

"No," said the mother, but turning to Meg.

Meg shook her head.

"Nothing?" he said to Meg.

"Nothing," she answered.

"Then don't say I haven't a 'art."

In a few moments they again heard the big drum—Meg with more terrors now that she fully knew what it meant. But regaining courage, she thrust the cap with the coppers into the mother's hands, and firmly held it there. As she held it, a thought of dwarfish Margit and Ark passed through. With generous glow she reflected "I can do this for a stranger. Why not get home and do something for them?"

The generous glow left behind it a flush of self-reproach.



CHAPTER XIX

AN AWAKENING

MEG was exhibited eight times within the hour and a half at Rochdale Bob's disposal that night. The financial result was that he had thirty-two shillings, and Meg and the mother sixteen shillings each, a result more phenomenal to the mother than her own mane of hair or the scarlet foot of Meg.

Rochdale Bob offered Meg shelter for the night in the caravan across the fair where his two nieces slept. But she decided to stay where she was; the mother was lonely and the child was so ill—dormant to the point of mystery. What little vitality it had was solemnly shadowed by the coming hours of the night. The mother and Meg knelt near the box watching its little dry lips faintly open and close like the mere pulsation of a vein. They were afraid even to surmise. It seemed almost wicked for their helpless minds to surmise anything about a crisis now so completely beyond every possible act of love that they could think of or do. Even a doctor's physic was powerless now, for the breath was too weak to bear the strain of the faintest sip. To trouble the little one even with a moistened feather now seemed less loving than to leave it in peace, and to silently hope with all the heart and soul.

How grim were the hard, hard facts; and yet how blended with the fairest fancies. The dim light of a small hanging-lamp on the velvety depths of shadow of



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the arched tent ; the frail mother's figure partly in light and partly in shade ; her meek, pale, attenuated face within the shadow of that massive, reddish-brown hair ; then the vision-like tender hint of the lowly Manger and Child vague in the shadow of the mother's own form, and both sorrowfully guarded over in the faint light by the more glowing beauty of Meg—all this was as if Nature had turned genius, presenting a pictorial suggestion of a new Annunciation wrought out of some of the lowliest and frailest material hidden away on the face of the earth : and yet the lowly frail material illuminated from within by the compassion and love of the highest in life.

As a town-clock chimed three, what the doctor had told the mother to particularly watch for, had verily come ! The child's little hard dry lips and nostrils were softened. Only this—but great thanksgiving tears stood in the mother's glad eyes. Only the merest moisture ; but she cried aloud as if to the universe, "Thank God !"

Meg's pity was on the verge of weeping also ; but her tears failed to fall because her emotion became strangely divided. Thought stopped to wonder if such overwhelming love as this frail mother's would ever come to glorify her. Pity was pity ; but love, ah, love, and especially mother's love, was surely the most passionate pity on earth, and something divine as well.

With the improvement growing, in the course of an hour's time Meg was induced to rest, and she nestled within one of the showman's big blankets.

For two hours she slept like a mound in the moonlight. At the end of the restless third hour, the sigh of awakened memory roused consciousness. More asleep than awake, Meg was troubled by some vast nightmare authority in the air and yet on the earth, near her and yet far off, saying with the rumble of thunder muffled by distance, "Whether it is the work of the Almighty, a



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touch of the devil, the fault of woman or man, the revenge of a ghost or beast, or—" and she awoke from the horrible lick of the Vampire of the Rocky Mountains of America upon her foot. She sat up like a being trying to spring out of a hot pit in which she lay up to her throat.

All was still, quiet, and cool. Meg looked through the dim twilight of the tent towards the breaking light of day. Reproaching herself for sleeping, for want of thought, she rose and flung open the canvas and turned to see the mother and child.

Meg saw the pale, wearied mother asleep on the ground. But lo, her head had been shorn of its massive clusters of hair! Meg, with amazement, found that the great, thick tresses lined the cradle-box like hair in a robin's nest—and within them was the peaceful dead body of the child. She cast herself down by the mother, and passionately kissed her even in her sleep. It was her last sleep, for the mother's lips and brow and hands were cold.



CHAPTER XX

A COMPACT

ROCHDALE BOB made a generous offer to Meg. If she would promise to "show" at three other fairs he would decently bury the mother and child at his own expense. If not, it would have to be a workhouse affair, a pauper's grave. Meg agreed, and two days later a most unique procession of sorrowful show-men, tearful show-women, silent gypsies, respectful boxers, tumblers, caravan lads, menagerie men, circus-riders, swing-boat, hobby-horse, and wax-work proprietors followed the natural phenomenon and her child to their rest in the earth.

Next day Meg was with the show-people on the road, making for Heslingdon, earning the burial of the mother and child—as she put it to herself—and a few pounds to make her future more clear.

At Heslingdon the fair-ground was swampy after recent floods. Rochdale Bob backed a canvas-arched van with its tail-board down, level with the platform of green-baized boxes, and made her as comfortable as he could in that. She was there like a guarded princess in her own right. A gypsy princess she appeared to be to some, for during the afternoon prior to the evening show factory-girls and servants hovered about the shafts of the van and its closed-up front, with threepenny-bits, sixpences, and reserve shillings, and even half-crowns, to secure them a private audience with some mysterious soul in that van in the confidence of Providence.

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On the second day two eager young women mounted the front of the van, and, between the forced flaps in the canvas, asked Meg if she told fortunes. No; she did not.

Meg told this to Rochdale Bob.

"Why not?" he asked, in his most impartial business tone. "I've a yallow shawl, a big brooch, and rings enough to hide your fingers. I'll coach you in the stars and stone-gazing and love-looks, and the general what-not gypsy chatter about the fair and dark young men, the long journey, and coming-in for wealth aback o' the moon! Why not? What do you say? Fortunes in the day, shows at night, and a rare big bank for Sunday mornings. *I'd* send you the lasses with the silver burning holes in their hands—and I'd take no more than half."

Meg shook her head.

"Oh, ho; you're getting as good a show-man as myself."

Meg said she could not possibly do it.

"Then you're missing yourself and *me* a chance; and a good one, too. You'd get the lads coming as well. I've already seen two on the van front, peeping in. I know their complaint. A bit of the sweetheart about 'em, wanting to know if their lasses will have 'em or not. You could say they would, earn your shekel—and there you are! Put on the shawl and the brooch! Your eyes will gypsy the rest."

"No!"

"Then never blame me if you don't die rich. I'm gypsy enough to tell you *that* fortune for nothing."

By eight o'clock on the second night at Heslingdon the noisy fair was at its loudest. Meg had already given four receptions. She was preparing to give a fifth, to an audience becoming large and noisy, when she heard the jingle of a chain, felt a jerk, saw the show-platform



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left behind, and realized that her canvas-arched van was being drawn by two horses hoofing down a slope at full gallop.

Tearing open the front canvas, Meg saw standing on the shaft-board two lashing drivers, Rollie and Ark.

Gratitude shocked her surprise completely away and she called, "For your life! Gallop! I'm glad!"

Rollie and Ark, looking ahead, gave an answering cheer—Ark, like an eager circus-rider on a Roman chariot, urging the steeds to their fiercest pace.

Suddenly, however, the full light of new thought cast the shadow of Meg's brain in bulk upon the whole of her heart, putting it into a total eclipse of darkest shame. What of her good friend, the show-man, and that duped audience in a rage? It wasn't fair—she hadn't carried out her promise! She didn't want Brink-o'-Dale yet. She wasn't ready—she'd return in her own way—not by force—and in that gaudy blue dress.

The blue show-dress indeed thrilled her with impulse, and, casting a rug over her, and holding her light chaff bed the full length of her in front like a pad, Meg at all hazards let herself fall face forward from the back of the van. On the drivers went unaware of the loss.

Meg was stunned but not hurt. The instant she deserted her bed to start back, however, she had misgivings. How could she explain? She wouldn't place Rollie and Ark in the power of perhaps the whole band of desperate show-men. Besides, Rollie and Ark would return to the fair for her—and what then! She decided to keep the future simple. Dragging the bed out of sight behind a hedge, she went over two fields to a cottage with a light in it.

When the door was opened the light of a candle seemed to gladly flash through to have the satisfaction of falling upon the blue-silk dress beneath the partly covering rug.

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"M'lady!" exclaimed an elderly woman, almost courtesying.

"May I shelter?"

"Most cert'ily, m'am! Do come in. It's like to be a storm."

Meg thankfully entered.

"Me an' my daughter, m'am, were in the middle o' thanking the Almighty for His mercy, afore her went to her bed in a way her's not rested in this house for thirteen year—and that's with a straight limb! Her's home to-day—cured. Her went with her crutches and her left 'em behind her! Her's pale yet, as you can see, but, bless'd be to God, her can *walk*; and her'll lie in her bed to-night in a way her hasna lied in it for thirteen year. And we on'y went a-Monday! And no more than our fare, our bit o' food and shelter, and a thanks-offering for the Saint Winifrede Box. Maybe you won't believe it, lady, but when I set eyes on you at th' door, I thought it were sommat o' the miracle still goin' on. But sit down 'm. Do. You look tired."

"*Will* you shelter me?—just for to-night—I've run from the fair—I don't want to go back—I can't—I daren't."

"I'd do anything for a soul *or* body this night—Rebecca an' me's so thankful."

"Or, will you—"

"And we on'y went a-Monday! Show the lady that you *can* walk, Rebecca."

Rebecca rose, and, with evident gratitude, walked to the door and back.

"It were paralytics; but her's left 'em in the Well, sure as the sun makes th' day."

"I was thinking that with that jacket and hat I could—"

"Rebecca came back in *them*, and I'll keep 'em in mem'ry of Holywell as long as I live."

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"I was going to ask—"

"Aye, aye, young lady, when Rebecca and me think of it, goin' a cripple a-Monday, and lying straight in her bed to-night, we believe Providence is good for anything—anything in this world."

Meg, at last realizing that the poor woman's trouble had been of thirteen years' standing, instead of thirteen minutes, curbed her own pressing excitement and asked:

"How was she cured?"

"Hey, m'am, that's beyond *my* tellin'. How? No-how. I can only give you where—hey, Rebecca?—and that's in the Winifrede Well."

"And where is that?"

"And—don't—you—know, m'am? And *you* never heard of Holywell?"

"No."

"Well, well. In Wales! The water heals all sorts; rich *and* poor, sick *and* lame. Miracles! The Sister o' Mercies said to Rebecca, it *might* please the Lord to let it act in her case; but she was to have faith. Faith Rebecca had, and there she is! Show *me* again, Rebecca, lass, whether you really *can* walk. *I* haven't faith enough to believe it, it's so new. It's as if I'd seen a cloud turned into an angel instead of rain. Look at her! Thirteen years with a crutch; to-day, without! I feel more as if it's the Winifrede Well that has given me new eyes—a new head—or something. Hold your arm right up from your side, lass; then I *can* believe you're not deceiving me with a miracle of some sort of crutch hidden from poor mortal eyes. Look at that, m'am!"

"And will the same water cure everybody—and—everything?"

"Well, young lady, as the good Sister o' Mercies said, it *might* please the Lord. But it didn't please Him to-day with Rebecca's tongue. Her's dumb, as maybe you've noticed."

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Meg was sympathetically shocked. She shook her head, glancing at Rebecca's mute-looking mouth, wishing that she had power, even by a gaze, to perform a miracle that would complete the woman's joy.

"But we're going again! Maybe only one blessing at a time can come. There's no telling. P'r'aps I was expecting too much. But when I saw Rebecca *walk* up from the water, I forgot my other wish, and didn't think of it until half-way home. But we'll go again, God willing; we'll cert'i'ly go again."

A tremor of secret personal wondering passed over Meg's face—it reddened—it paled—the lips quivered. The woman looked at Meg inquiringly. Incomplete tears glistened in Meg's eyes as she met the woman's eyes asking questions with their gaze. Meg impulsively tugged her blue skirt from over her slightly lifted scarlet foot in the white shoe. "Could it cure—that?" cried Meg, kicking off the shoe.

The woman's surprise could only be perfected after she had searched for her spectacles. Then she said, "After Rebecca, miss, I shouldn't say No to anything. As the Sister o' Mercies would say, it *might* please the Lord. If it was Rebecca's or my own, I'd cert'i'ly try. Does it pain, young lady?"

"N-o. In my mind it does."

"But nobody sees it. You can use it?"

Meg nodded. Tears fell round and whole. She could not explain all the strange forebodings which had come to her in connection with that foot, made too familiar to herself by the curious words of the show-man and the nightly exhibitions.

It was as strange as if her forefinger had held a canny secret of parentage, birth, childhood, and destiny for a number of years, and was beginning to reveal the secret in the mysticism of feelings too vague for full thought at each faint revelation; but nevertheless evolving



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thought, thought that forced the unknown future upon the consciousness, thought that darkened life with dread and doubt.

"It *do* pain you then, lady? Sit down, 'm. Rest. You can cert'i'ly stay here *this* night, if you don't mind our little room and poor ways."

With grateful candor Meg pressed fresh tears from her eyes with her hands. "You're kind and good. I only want until early morning—only until morning, early."

Meg sat as if transmitting through her tearful gaze clear mental pictures of new life on to the little shining space within the oval floral ornamentation in the centre of the oven door; transmitting them so as to look at the pictures afresh, in separation from herself.

That little shining black space, indeed, was like a window opening upon a new heaven and earth to her. Everything seemed new. Even the changing degrees of glow from the flickering fire tinting her cheek were as rays of warmth from new outer spheres which her widening thoughts were in communication with. Even the wind piping in a vague new key-note somewhere outside came from the new spheres. Also from there came even that occasional tingle of central nerves which made her heart apparently stand still with an electric elation before the sudden presence of an intuitive feeling of some future joy—a joy the more alluring because unknown. Then, ah, then the rapid beating of her heart! It was as if the heart would overtake joy and capture it forever. Then, ah, then her throbs seemed to be the silent-footed flight of part of herself going in advance into that new region of new hope. The prospective relief and gladness fortified the spirit even for death—if death had to be passed through before the whole spirit could be wholly free to enter into the new delight.



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Not even when the woman asked Meg if she were fretting about home did the pictures wholly fade. They were still sufficiently vivid to revive during the simple supper of oat-cake and milk. They returned after the "good-night" to the mother and daughter at the door of her neat little room.

In the strange room, Meg's feelings were those of a voyager the first night at sea—in case of emergency her clothes were better on than off. She therefore rested under the quilt in her blue-silk and yellow needle-work, looking like a beautiful fairy queen who had deserted the over-crowded regions of Oberon to seek loneliness and peace in the commonplace bed of humankind.

Nevertheless, the fairy could not sleep. She could only hover in an intangible no-man's-land, between a drowsy wakefulness and a wakeful drowsiness; that land where speech is mute yet speaks, sight is blind yet sees, limbs are at rest yet active, feelings are passive yet feel, thoughts are dormant yet think, and tears are still yet weep—that tranquil, passive border-land more mysteriously active than life, because life's true function is in action; and more mystically in repose than death, because death cannot be in motion and yet be at rest as well.

Her soul seemed to leave her and travel through ether to seek the cause of things, the beginning of life—her life—in the hope of also finding the end.

But the soul returned like silence through silence, like space through space, to hover doubtfully on wing within her, as if not sure of her itself, prompting her by its very muteness to ask of her own being, lying like a stranded wanderer between the stars, "What am I? Who am I?"

For answer she only felt herself the more inexplicable. She seemed to herself as cold and isolated as a



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lone big boulder in a field, related to nothing but the vanished glacier of a pre-historic epoch that had left it there.

And yet there glowed the contradictory feeling that she was as vitally a warm part of the universe as an opening bud with an intuitive yearning towards the fulness of bloom. She tried to recall whether Ark had ever told her when she was a child some fairy tale of how once upon a time some women had been lilies and some roses? She had a feeling as if she had been both—with something of the lily still in one foot and something of the rose in the other.

Ah, those fairy tales of Ark's! When she was a child they were true. All true. A little later, alas! they ceased to be true. Mere fancy. Now they seemed to be true again! No, no; she only wished it so. She was *there* and in flesh and blood—born of something more than water, as Ark at one time had playfully said she was. But, alas! all Nature was vague; her own nature was remote, as if her father had been the wandering spirit of some heaven-wearied angel wishing for earth, and her mother the ghost of some burned-out creature of flames yearning too late for heaven, leaving her a shrinking, helpless young woman, with mental and physical dreads of the world, of man, of life, even of love. She hid her face, wishing with all her mind and body that she were a man in boldness and strength, to go forth and meet as man did the dangers of life and love more than half-way. And yet in a little while—and not vaguely, not remote, but within her, around her—she realized that she was a child veritably born of the great heavens, though of earth, with the elements of the heavens in her as well; and she thanked God for life, yea, for love.

The glow of this sent an impassioned and loyal feeling of conscious womanhood flaming from her head right through her bosom to her limbs. She was, indeed,



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woman! She was glad. She wanted to be woman, nothing but woman through and through—fretful and discontented now only because of the unfulfilled wish to be the woman to the promised perfection of growth in body and soul. She would not change the special dowry of womanhood for all the manhood in the bravest hero or the noblest lover in all the world. No! She was even *life*—life—if but love would let it grow.

Her mind glided from these vivid thoughts of the ethereal to dreamy thoughts of the practical. Though still in bed, and in the dark, Meg started on her journey. She left the blue show-dress in the keeping of the mother and daughter, to be delivered up if asked for, having bought from them a brown dress, a black jacket and hat which hung behind her bedroom door. She crossed the fields, walked to the highest piece of land to look for a canal, saw one two miles ahead, arranged with a boatwife to sail to Runcorn, started the voyage, reached Runcorn, inquired the best way to get to Holywell, took it (the details here were vague), reached Holywell (the details were in a Welsh summer haze), saw the owners of the Well (as if in the clouds afar off), and was undressing to go into the magic water—when she fell asleep.

Meg heard in her troubled sleep the voice of some supreme authority calling, "Whether it is the work of the Almighty, a touch of the devil, the fault of woman or man, the revenge of a ghost or beast, *or* the—" She awoke startled in the dawn.

That confirmed her resolve. After breakfast she bought the brown dress and black jacket and hat from her hostess, left the show-dress in her keeping, gave the dumb daughter a new half-crown piece, said good-bye, and walked to the highest point of land.

She there saw a canal two miles away. It was duplicating as much of the red sunrise as it could reflect

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within its narrow mirror, and Meg tramped towards it. Before the close of her journey Meg had to leave some fields for a road. Turning into yet another road, she came face to face with Rochdale Bob, abreast of the first of his three caravans.

"Ho, ho! Whoa!" he called to his horses, as a preliminary to a full round sentence of playful irony to cover his gladness. But the worn look in Meg's face caused him to change his tactics. Thrusting his hand down his pocket, he said, "Are you wantin', miss? Here!" and he opened his hand, full of stout five-shilling pieces as strongly characterized as himself. "Here; take 'em. For nothing. You needn't show."

Even to her own surprise Meg retorted, "But I will! I'll carry out my promise."

"You bang Sunday for being fair and square!"

"But that's all—three days."

A clouding of his face made her feel this limitation ungracious.

"Then it wasn't your own wish that whipped you off at a wild-horse gallop?"

"No."

His eyes fired into an alert threat as he asked, "Then who did it?"

"You can't know. I'll carry out my promise, but you must never ask. I'll not tell."

"Hey, come on!" he replied, cracking his whip upon the bargain and calling to the horses "Rover!" "Charlie!" as if they were more than ever his personal friends. "Only," he added, playfully, as they walked, "I think you might give me a chance for damages for a new van. I found it wheel-off five mile away over the clough. I say nothing of my show-dress."

"That you can get," said Meg.

"*That's* all right then. Whoa! Charlie! Rover! Ride, lass. You're fagged; get into the van with the little uns."




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Meg, fearing to meet Rollie or Ark, got in. Very soon she heard beneath the little red-curtained window a whistled ditty, a carol of content only such as she had heard, full, free, and meditatively merry, from the pursed lips of Rollie Rondle.

Indeed, to make quite sure, Meg peeped through the curtain's fissure. It was only the show-man, only Rochdale Bob, but with a new light in his blue eye in keeping with his rich, warbling soliloquy of song without words.

Meg was thankful she had met him, to give his genial heart its due. She was hoping, too, that in the excitements of the fair she would unthink some of the thoughts, and unsee some of the pictures of that terribly perplexing night of fancies, dreams, and doubts.

She began her new journey, however, deliberately listening to two meditatively merry warblings—one outside the van, and the other within herself; one by Rochdale Bob near at hand; the other by Rollie Rondle far away.



CHAPTER XXI

OPENING A NEW DOOR

THEY did not reach their destination for the next fair until late that afternoon.

Rochdale Bob seemed to be still whistling. He certainly whistled most of the time he was getting his three caravans into form at Cloughtonhow; and now and then, thrush-like, he varied his warblings by subdued variations of his ventriloquial trill of Ri-tool-aroo-lal-lal-ilee.

During the afternoon on the second day, when only lads playing truant from school were on the fair-ground, he sat sideways on the shaft-board of Meg's van. He was dangling his leg like a pendulum, and chewing a straw. With one hand like a lower bracket under his elbow, and the other hand like an upper bracket under his chin, he was supporting his face in the exacting tranquillity of gazing into space. His gaze was so intent and fixed afar that it did not seem able to get back again.

A distant marionette proprietor thinking Rochdale Bob was looking his way, significantly tipped his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the Bull Inn. But Bob did not see it. When the marionette proprietor disturbed Bob's gaze by putting the invitation into a shout, Bob shook his head, continued the pendulum, fixed his gaze again, and chewed the straw as if he had put his jaded thoughts and feelings out to grass.



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Within half an hour Rochdale Bob was in a field; wholly in grass, lying in it at full length. But he was uneasy; now turning on his right side, now on his left. To settle himself he took out two bank-books from his breast-pocket to study. But as they only repeated gratifying information which he knew to the penny as exactly as any figures in black and white could tell him, they did not give that strangely required repose to his usually iron nerves and adamantean emotions which he now began to mutely curse and swear for.

If he were so bad then—when he had said nothing to her—what would he be when— “Ho, ho!” he sighed, and began to pull up grass as if it were now the turn of his hands to be out at pasture entirely on their own account.

Only on the death of his old mother could he remember feeling so queer. Nay, he felt more peculiarly queer now than then. The other crisis put him off showing for three months; this one promised to do it for the rest of his life.

He rose, after all, to accept the invitation to the Bull Inn. No! If it had to be done at all, it would have to be done without any of that. To cool himself he went down a lane to the river, took off his boots and stockings, and paddled up to his knee-breeches, like an overgrown lad.

That night, when he was on his show-barrel in front of the booth, there was a degree less humor in his ventriloquial call; he was not so vigorous with the drum; his voice was not so loud; his invitation was not so urgent, and, instead of speaking of Meg as “The Blood-footed Beauty from the Rocky Mountains of America,” he simply styled her “The Young Lady with the Crimson Foot.”

The following afternoon was brilliantly sunny. Almost all the show folk but Rochdale Bob were under

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their caravans to get in the shade and on the coolest piece of earth. He was sitting on the shaft-board of Meg's van. His legs were not dangling to and fro; he was not whistling. His lips looked too glum to have even a hum behind them. His brows were puckered with ill-temper, and ill-temper with no being on the planet but himself.

At last, smacking his knee as if that were a scape-goat for himself as a whole, he swerved off the shaft-board and went round towards the open door of the caravan.

With one foot on the steps, keeping out of range, he called, "May a man speak to you?"

Meg trembled. Her intuitions would not let her reply.

"You're in?" he called.

"Can't *you* come in?" she recklessly said.

Still out of range, he slowly replied, "Oh—aye—if you'll *let* me. *If* you'll *let* me."

"It's your van—"

"Nay, yours!" (He winked in private appreciation of his own unsuspected genius.) "Well, it's yours—if you like."

Meg felt the air between her and the door was oppressive with the dead calm of storm.

"You don't ask—how?" he called, with a laugh pathetically speculative.

"Money!" she called, dallying upon his thought to please him, and to make an escape for herself.

"No. No! Should I tell you?"

Meg quickly answered, "Stealing it!"

"Like you did before, hey? No—I didn't mean that—that goes for nothing—don't mind it. But the van's yours. How? Guess that."

Meg's heart beat as if at the point of some great battle in self-defence.

"Hey?" he called, stroking his brow.

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Meg was sighing against her will.

"Isn't it worth guessing?"

"Yes, yes," her heart answered, to meet all the goodness that she knew he meant.

"It is, is it?" he asked, moving into view upon the pivot of one leg. "Oh, now, don't let it flurry!" he appealed, jerking out of range again. "I'm off home if it comes to pocket-handkerchiefs," and off he went to the same indented place in the grass like a hare to its "form."

There he argued the matter out to himself as if it were purely business. He again went towards the van.

He modified a bold intention of standing on the bottom step and facing her, by sitting on the top step with his face to the fresh air. But his mutterings went behind him.

"It's business I want to speak—that is, partly business, and yet *not* business—no, it isn't business at all, except—at any rate, don't fret. You may know what I'm thinking and you may not, but anyway, one how or another, if you don't want, it's to make no difference to *you*."

He paused, lifting his seal-skin cap as a housewife lifts a lid to relieve a pan. "See there," he said, bending backward and putting an opened bank-book as near to her as he could. "There's another. And that's five hundred worth of parchment on my life. And that's a row of five houses and a shop in Rochdale. Now I don't mean buying, or bargaining, or bidding at auction—*still*, it's only right that you know what's at the back of anything I *may* say. But first of all look at 'em."

For his sake Meg took up a book; but she no more heeded the significance of the figures than a passing sunbeam heeds the number on a door.

"Three nothing five two and fifteen shillings in that," he recited from memory and partly turning round.



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Handing the other book he continued, "One six five four, ten and six in that. And that's the five-hundred parchment on my life—though it's true I'm only gone forty-three. Then, over and above this, I'm as good as owner of a showing Peeroovian Dwarf and a Chinese Giant. Both worth five pound in coppers a week. I've a splendid performing tiger. And more than half of one of the moneyest elephants on the road is mine. I *did* tell you I owned a wife—I spoke that way—but that was only show-man business to make you easy. I'm as unmarried a man as a stone man as sees all the brides come into church and can't so much as kiss his hand. That's on my soul. Now, then! I'd give up showing—leave the road—turn into my nest at Rochdale—and begin my young days again. There's no hurry! Your time's mine. All I want is to be happy—if we can. *You've* got the makings of it for *me*. But if you can't fall in—don't tell me. Only tell me if you can. Of course, if you *can*, I'd like—but no, I'll not hurry. Your time's mine. Only— However! Think of it. Do the best you can for me," and, pocketing his bank-books, life-policy, and title-deed, he withdrew, leaving with new point in Meg the memory of the gypsy's words, "If you love a seven-foot giant—love him and don't care."



CHAPTER XXII

THE DOUBLE DAWN

VERY early next morning the fair was broken up into sections, and some of them were moving on wheels. Meg, to get away from her quaint, good friend the easier for him, gave an indefinite answer. Shaking her girlish hand in his ample one, he said :


“Well, if you’re fixed on going your own ways again, God bless you, young woman ! Rochdale will find me. And any time. Remember ! Money, meat, or shelter. Don’t come and ask for it. Come and take it ; whether it means anything or nothing for me. Good-bye. *Think* of Rochdale Bob ! Will you ?”

“I—will !” sincerely answered Meg, twisting away, and running in continuance of the act of farewell.

She was soon on the road—alone—perplexed—wanting home—anxious about the results of her action upon Rollie and Ark. But more strongly than anything she wanted wonderful Holywell. The wish had become an influence she could not cast from off her mind any more than by mere thought she could cast her foot from off her ankle.

The more inquiries she had made about the miraculous cures, the more eager was she to put within its emancipating power the whole of her life. For her mystical scarlet foot was now but an outward emblem of the mysticism of her whole nature. Something was wrong—weak—irresolute in every particle of her mortal frame ;





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in every earthly breath she drew ; nay, deep-reaching even into her troubled soul. The soul itself she believed, could she but see it, was scarlet with the sin of her own wilfulness, the pride of thought, the vanity of feeling, as against humble, homely duty for Margit—poor little Margit—alone ! Meg realized that if not another creature but Margit lived in the Old Mill House, the Old Mill House was her place, too ; she was Margit's as by the claims of duty and the rights of love.

And yet she was there—on the road, idle, useless ! Why not rush back penitent, devoted, firm in the resolve never again to leave ; never again to even wish for anything but what love and duty in the Old Mill House might bring her ?

Her ideal Holywell stood in the way. Its promises drew her. She would return home all the firmer in dutiful will, all the purer in heart, all the stronger in soul if she passed through the miraculous experience of which she had heard. On she marched, a pilgrim seeking a shrine.

Her visionary journey to Holywell while she was at the Cloughtonhow cottage revived. To follow the plan then indicated, she once more sought a canal-boat.

A long, lithe boatwoman, as with prophetic knowledge under her shadowy cotton-print bonnet, invited Meg aboard ; and Meg felt the preordained nature of her mission confirmed. Nay, her thoughts of it became mysterious belief. The woman added, as though Providence had prearranged for her to do so, that they were going on to Runcorn, to be towed from there by tug to Mostyn, a mile or two from Holywell. Meg's belief was ratified by a thrill. In gratitude she loved the whole world ! Woman, man, child ! Bird and beast ! Yes, she loved with new keenness even the gaunt, panting tow-horse ; nay, in compassion, this more than anything within range. " Poor, wearied, worn-out thing ! " she



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cried within. An elevating rapture of self-sacrifice entranced her. Had she but the strength, her very bosom should be roped to relieve that worn beast of earth of its burden, with a fuller gladness of heart than it had been her joy to feel. "Oh, Margit! oh, Ark!" she mused; "wait, wait; your burdens shall be lightened yet, and by me!"


It was a dawn like a wide white lily with golden pistils of flecked cloudlets that bloomed at its brightest, when the black tug, in advance of Meg's flat, broke the cloud-reflecting mirror of the silvery Dee.

An extra tinge of reflected light on the cabin steps tempted Meg to climb half-way up and view the new-found land.

Cheshire on her left was an emerald set in a golden rim of beach sand. Opposite was Wales curtained by mountain, fringed with wood, gemmed here and there with white cots, wellnigh human in their suggestive homeliness, their windows momentarily greeting the advancing dawn with its own changing facets of joy.

But there was also a dawn within Meg. She beheld the beauty of the earth and young day. Her soul, like a sun, rose with warmth through her veins, flushing her cheeks with the promise of a glorious new day of life. Belief was increased. She could believe anything of heaven and earth with a double dawn like unto that reflecting silvery brilliance of the river, doubling the sky, increasing the hills, bringing them clearer. Yes, with the divine light of an inner dawn in her being, all things were possible even to her. Already she was as if born again into a new life of love, of passionate devotion to aught that that great day might command or reveal.

Faith gave her courage for each new half-mile she walked. Faith took her all the way to long and hilly Holywell, built as if to compel pilgrims to its Well to do penance up its steps.



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Meg, panting with the long climb up the mountain-road converted into a town street, stood absorbing the shadowy, worn Gothic Well of Saint Winifrede ; absorbing the sounds and damp cool feeling of running water somewhere under a groined arch that was visible like a railed house-area below the narrow pavement ; noting the echoed voices of women and the splash of water somewhere out of sight.

With sudden illumination of thought Meg noted the clusters of crutches and sticks hanging in the gloom of the arches and the shadows of the pillars. She trembled with awe. She had nothing to leave behind as proof. Nothing—unless the color would come from her foot like a glove.

A sun-tanned woman with a flat straw hat over a frilled white cap asked Meg in pleasant Cymric English if she wanted lodgings, the woman remarking that Meg was too late for going into the Well that day.

Meg accompanied the woman to her thatched cottage a little higher up the steep street.

The woman gave Meg full information. Through her, indeed, a priest called in the evening.

But Meg could not enter into the subtle, trembling tenderness of her feelings with him. He had to go. At night there was a tapping at the cottage door, as if tenderness had turned silence into just-audible sound. It was a hooded Sister of Mercy. She wanted to see the young woman.

Meg retired into her small, low-roofed bedroom on the ground floor. She bared her foot, ready, and waited as in a silent state of agitated prayer.

The Sister of Mercy who walked in was somewhat old, fresh-complexioned, and plain-looking. Meg was disappointed. But only for a few moments. She discovered that beauty is not always on the surface, that a pair of sympathetic eyes can give a soul's significance to poor



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form, and that a compassionate voice can give the beauty of a good heart's perennial youthfulness to age ; and in regret for her thought, Meg almost embraced the creature.

With the light as of an altar candle in the gloom, Meg and her visitor sat near a shining, old oak wardrobe like a confessional.

"And what is your trouble, dear child?"

The Sister touched Meg's shoulder as with a soft, supernatural touch of consolation, more sympathetic than words.

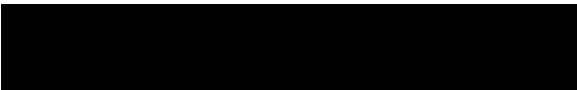
Meg at once exposed her scarlet foot, saying, "See! I want the Well."

Sister Cecilia was surprised. She sat looking down—thinking. Soon she reverently closed her eyes. Looking at the scarlet foot yet again, she knelt and tenderly held the foot as something that was possibly mystical far beyond any conception of Meg's.

Indeed, Sister Cecilia, bending low in holy silence and with a rapt face, was thinking of the blessed Saint Catherine of Sienna ; of Sister Emmerich ; of the wondrously favored Maria Mori, the saintly virgin of Caldaro ; all of whom were graciously permitted to have upon the hands, feet, and side the Stigmata—the miraculous imprint of the sacred wounds of the Crucifixion. Praise be to God, perchance this was the beginning of one more miraculous manifestation of divine favor which the Church so justly venerated in some of its saints ; and Sister Cecilia bowed still lower, and in faith reverently kissed the scarlet foot.

"Nay, nay, dear child, trouble not, but marvel. Marvel! You may be one of the blessed among women. You may have found favor in the sight of the sufferings of Our Blessed Lord."

"I don't understand it!" cried Meg, looking down at her foot. "I want to love more, to love all, and it—or something—will not let me."



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“Even the Blessed Virgin did not understand at first. Did not the Angel Gabriel say, ‘Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace with God’? When he gave his fuller message did not Mary still ask, ‘How shall this be done?’ And the angel answered, ‘The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee.’ *Overshadow*, dear child. Think of that. Overshadow. And yet beloved Mary freely said, ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to thy word.’ Would *you* not glory in being a handmaid of the Lord?”

Meg closed her eyes, not accustomed to such direct appeals to the sensitive secrets of the soul.

“Oh, gracious Redeemer!” cried Sister Cecilia, with exemplary surrender, “If Thou wilt, here am I!” and then bowed her head, humbly awaiting the slightest favor of a divine injunction that might be granted her as she pressed her rosary to her breast.

In a few moments her face was lifted. It was paler, but her eyes were more radiant. No revelation had come to her, but she had had holy fellowship.

“We must all wait, dear child, with patience for the fulness of time. Have faith. Fear not. Watch and pray. This mark of Providence on your flesh is as yet a mystery. It may prove to be one of the most cherished marks of favor that is granted to a chosen few for the strengthening of the Church and the assurance of the faithful. It may not be so; but whatever it is, we must bear, we must wait.”

“I want it away!” appealed Meg.

“Not what *you* want, dear child; not what we want.”

“It’s against me!”

“Nay, nay. That may be ungracious to Heaven, did you know all”—Sister Cecilia again tenderly contemplated the blood-tinted foot—“did you know all. You may yet be allowed to suffer with Saint Francis and Saint



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Catherine, and rejoice with them above the gladness of mortals because their sufferings were those of the Cross. Listen, dear child: if you come to feel tortures as of nails through your hands and feet; or of a crown of thorns pressing your bow; or as of a spear entering your side; or if you hear a voice; or are favored in sleep with visions of the Passion of the Redeemer in active pain as on Calvary—rejoice! Rejoice greatly. Think yourself full of the holiest of God's honors, favored with the mortal sufferings of the divine Lord upon you for the poor world's sake."

While Sister Cecilia's phrases flowed with the fluency of a rhapsodist, Meg's vague thoughts were trying to get some personal significance out of the one allusion to hearing a voice in sleep.

In vague fear she appealed, "I want to try the Well; only the Well. I've come for that—I'm willing—and—I must go home to-morrow."

Sister Cecilia rose and again sat by Meg, saying, with a solemn low gentleness more akin to awe than vigor would have been, "To-morrow? Child, *this* day thy soul may be required of thee.' To-morrow is a long, long, long way off. So long it may never come to us on earth. But the soul, dear friend, is required of us long before death. I gave mine twenty years ago. I have given it every day since. I only grieve because I cannot give it every hour. And—I say it with the vanity of the spirit, not of the flesh—women's souls are especially subject to the call of God during this present life in doing and suffering, in self-sacrifice, in charity, in love for all, but especially for the poor, the sick, the weak, the lame—"

"But why?" cried Meg, with a thrill of protest. "Why women? Oh, why is it that God gives them so much more to bear than He gives to men?"

"We must not question the divine law, nor doubt its ultimate justification, but, in noble humility, carry it

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out. Look at the beasts of the field, and the fowls of the air—the *mothers* are the patient long-sufferers, the devoted, self-sacrificing ones, the—”

“But *we* are not beasts and birds!”

“Yea, yea, child. Think. We can grovel or we can soar; we can growl or we can sing.”

“I mean—oh, it seems too much. Too severe. Too hard. It’s the women—always the women. The men crush and kill them. That’s one of the things I’ve come for. I don’t understand it, and I want to.”

“Do not women, when sin enters into them, crush and kill others?”

“Why couldn’t we have been without all this! I don’t want faults, but I have them, and want to be without them.”

“In that way comes grace.”

“And then we’re to love only *one*!” cried Meg, with contemptuous passion. “And *that’s* another reason why I’ve come. I could ‘show’ all my life for one,” she said, confusing Sister Cecilia. “I could work all my life for another (Ark), I could laugh all my life with another (Rollie), and cry all my life for another (Mowcroft). But I can’t do any! What are we to do with all the love that is wanted, and all the love we can give? Is it wrong to work for another?”

“Nay, a glory.”

“Or to laugh with some one else?”

“That may have its blessings.”

“Or to pity?”

“Jesus wept.”

“Oh, I’m sorry I *am* a woman!”

“Hush. That is a crime against creation; rebellion against God.”

“I wish I had been something that wasn’t woman or man—a tree—or a bush—or that picture!—nothing to think of—something that hasn’t to be more than it is—

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or else nothing at all—or else both woman and man in one, so that there'd be no trouble, no—”

“Dreams. Impossible, child. We women must not forget that it was our Eve who first sinned. We therefore must be among the first to redeem. Let us rejoice that it was the glory and anguish of Mary to bear the Saviour of the World. But remember, dear child, *He* it was who was crucified. Man! But as in every man there is an Adam and a Christ, so in every woman there is an Eve and a Mary as well. We as Eve can sin for the Adam in man; or we can be the foster-mothers, at least, of the Christ in every man who comes our way.”

Meg's eyes became dreamy. Then they lit up rapturously into mirrors of spiritual delight. “It is that I have come for—I want to be great enough to help—to cure—to *save*.”

“Who is it you wish to save?”

Meg hid her face upon Sister Cecilia's shoulder.

“Do you wish to do it for his sake, or your sake?”

Meg had to sift all her old feelings in regard to Owen Mowcroft as if they were new. “His,” she answered.

“Then you love him as a brother?”

“I pity him.”

“Does he want you—in marriage?”

“I don't know! I don't know!” murmured Meg, bewildered. “I can't tell!”

“Would you marry him?”

Meg again had to sift her feelings. Then she gave the strange answer: “If you would. If any good woman for *his* sake would—then I would! If it is right to save—yes!”

“What is the sin you would save him from?”

“Oh, that cannot matter!” cried Meg, with self-sacrifice more heroic even than Sister Cecilia's just then. “He is *lost*; if I can save him must I?”

“If you are given true strength that way.”



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“It is the strength that I want !”

“Grace be unto you. If faith has come to you to approach the greatly favored shrine of holy Saint Winifrede, it is not for me to say nay. God may be speaking through you ; not through me—not through me. Through the blessed waters of the Holy Well more may be revealed to both of us. But let me pray for you, pray that though you have faith to seek what *you* want, still to have faith though you do not find it—faith before, faith after, nothing but faith. God willing,” she said, rising, “I shall come for you in the afternoon—to-morrow.”

Meg sank lower upon her chair and hid her face, simply pleading, “Come !”

Sister Cecilia, embracing Meg’s shoulders, tenderly combined prayer with farewell as she softly added : “Mary and the Saints keep watch over you in the night ; the Blessed Redeemer Himself await you in the morning.”

Then Sister Cecilia almost imperceptibly withdrew, leaving Meg alone and yet not alone ; still in the spectral company of the benign influence.

Now for the first time in her life Meg fully understood the Church choral response—“The noble army of Martyrs praise Thee !”—and as she knelt by the bed she seemed to herself to be singing, in continuation :

“Oh Lord, save Thy people, and bless Thine heritage.
Govern them, and lift them up forever !”



CHAPTER XXIII

THE ORDEAL

ON the following afternoon Sister Cecilia called. Meg was grateful but silent, agitated but calm, full of faith yet trembling on the verge of the experiment for change.

Sister Cecilia herself concentrated all her knowledge of the miracles from the earliest times into the silent thought that perchance this was to be one of the day of days. In her meditative eyes, even as she spoke cheerfully to Meg, there was the look of a concurrent prayer of the spirit.

In a few moments she and Meg were kneeling by the bedside—Sister Cecilia giving herself up as the humble pleader between this seeking creature and Saint Winifrede.

After they rose not a word was spoken; hardly a word was thought. They crossed the narrow street to the Well, and descended the commonplace-looking steps—Sister Cecilia leading the way not towards the shadowy groined arch, as Meg imagined she would, where the spring-cold water rolled and bubbled up with such clear and constant fulness into its large basin, but to a place like a private court-yard. A large and deep square stone bath was in the centre. Into this bath the water flowed from the Gothic basin that was partitioned off out of sight.

On pilgrims' days the little court-yard was usually



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thronged with lame pilgrims and their friends; but this day Sister Cecilia and Meg were alone with the sacred water, the blessed sun shining upon the surface of its icy-cold depths with hope-giving rays.

Sister Cecilia gave Meg a blue gown and showed her into one of the little dressing-places around.

Before Meg was ready, Sister Cecilia, in a blue gown and bare feet, went knocking at Meg's door.

In a few moments she held Meg by the hand, leading her and her conspicuous scarlet foot to the stone steps of the Well; leading her down to the cold, cold water which Sister Cecilia entered waist deep without an apparent shock—so resolute was she with the will and nerve of faith, encouraging Meg to follow.

Meg followed with heroic emulation and yet with many an involuntary yielding of her breath after each deeper step into the chilly depths. At last with a cry between a sob and a scream she sank breast-deep in the paralyzing cold, quivering in Sister Cecilia's arms.

Only the deeper troubles of the spirit could have fortified Meg to dare and endure the absolute torture of the gnawing pangs of the cold—pangs that almost swamped every other consciousness in their own. The will, too, was trying to keep the overtaxed mind strong and clear for the free exercise of the all-important faith; while the heart was tremulous with an inner sobbing concern between soul and body, even between life and death—for death quivered not far off in that surrounding icy coldness of the deeper depths of the Well. Then within all the strife was all-needful faith itself, shaken, physically enfeebled; and yet faith had to go through the real ordeal unaided, for Sister Cecilia liberated herself from Meg.

Showing what further had to be done, with fingers clinging to the stone parapet of the Well, Sister Cecilia,



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submerged to the neck, moved along the side, encouraging Meg to do the same.

Meg followed. Sister Cecilia then mounted a large stone in the water. With her hands she raised her face to the parapet surface, and, muttering, kissed the "Wishing Stone," that was slightly dented with the prayerful kisses of the faithful.

Meg solemnly did the same.

Was it over? Yes! All that mortal could do was thus done. Sister Cecilia gave Meg liberty to return.

Eager for results Meg hastened to the steps.

Through the water she could see that her foot was purple. She thanked God for *some* change. On the first dry step, however, the foot was scarlet. Still scarlet! She sighed to the depths of all regret. She could have held her ankle against the edge of a step and snapped off her foot with a hammer or a stone.

The foot was still scarlet all the way up the steps, and all along to the dressing-place.

There Sister Cecilia, sorely tried with disappointment, said: "Cease not in thy thought of faith, nor in the act of faith. The Almighty's time is not our time. Still hope. No one knows what hour, nay, what any moment of God's, might yet bring forth."

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CHAPTER XXIV

THE TROED GOCH

To go down the steep street to Holywell seemed to Meg like repeating the footsteps of her failure. She therefore climbed to the yet higher part of the town. She climbed still higher to get out of it, tramping until she entered a wide undulating region of hills. She tramped until the farmsteads became scattered cottages, the fields more like moors, and where lean sheep took the place of cows. Distant heights revealed themselves with the deep blue significance of mountains set against a light blue sky, which suggested a serene new world somewhere beneath its beauty in a vale beyond.

Immediately above Meg the sky was massed with dark clouds, and the brown moorland became black in the gloom. Even her brain was like a moorland turned into gloomy boggy depths; her hot brow moist and beady as if it were oozing warm thunder rain.

Exceedingly lonely, without a sign of woman, man, or even bird in all the broad expanse of undulating land flowing far, far away from her, Meg feverishly hastened to reach the fair region of beautiful blue beyond. The way to it was along a milk-white road with broad green margins of grass and fern on each side; the road dipping and waving like a long white serpent with its broad back beneath her feet, and its tapering tail towards the sky ahead.

At last Meg had to rest on one of the broad green



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margins. She did so opposite a roadside pine-wood. But she was soon obliged to move, for its dark vistas were haunted and its restless dark plumes spoke with ceaselessly whispering murmurs and sighs.

She travelled to a sun-lit bowlder like a reposing sheep, and rested there. In the stillness she came to doubt her conduct. She was travelling away from home. Pitying memories of Margit, Ark, and Rollie, and a curiosity about Owen Mowcroft hinted "Turn back." Pity for herself definitely said, "Go forward and be free! Never go back!"

With a spring from the ground Meg briskly went forward. But in a few moments she stood as motionless as a post. Irritating doubt held her. She wept with the exasperation of indecision. When this waned and vision became conscious, the first thing she saw was a peculiar squat flint-stone on the road. Its shape suggested Ark. Was this one of those strange signs such as Margit would act upon?

Before she had decided, another stone—bigger, rounder, more genial-looking—suggested Rollie. This double circumstance was indeed strange! It caused her to consciously test chance by looking for a third stone of a more genteel form suggesting Mowcroft. After somewhat special seeking she found one.

There might be something in it all—according to Margit. At any rate, she herself couldn't decide what to do, so she would let chance or luck, or whatever it might be called, decide for her.

With a piece of slate from the roadside she scratched the letter A on Ark's stone, R on Rollie's, and O. M. on the third. Placing these inscribed representatives on the road a few yards away from her, she sought a fourth stone. It had to conform to a preconceived shape to represent herself. The fact that she found it conspicuously standing upright on the broken moorland wall

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gave all the previous intimations a confirming touch of the mysterious and divine.

On that stone she scratched M. M. in large capitals, stood in position, closed her eyes, and decreed that if she hit any of the three stones, she would turn back and go home.

"And when home?" came the question as if from beneath her closed eyelids.

To think, she opened them.

To answer, she closed them again.

Yes! The stone she hit would indicate which of the three Providence meant her to most heed when she reached home.

With tightly closed eyes she cast the stone effigy of herself at the other three. She failed to hit any. More intensely provoked than ever she went forward, kicked the three ridiculous stones out of her track, and walked on, limping.

She did not travel far. The O. M. stone had hurt her foot—the foot. Was there some special sign in that? The foot pained so that she sat on the grassy margin and took off her boot and stocking. The scarlet foot seemed more scarlet than ever against the green grass. She curiously wondered if it was still scarlet right through the flesh, even after the Well—and began scraping the skin at the instep. She was completing her discovery that the color was still deeper than the skin when a horse and lady galloped past in the direction Meg had been travelling.

The lady, with a glaring poppy in her dark hat and a long black riding-robe, was lashing the black horse with sudden passion, looking as if she were under the high strain of some fierce excitement of the moment. The horse with its full mane, and its tail almost to its heels, answered the lashings by bounding and rearing, declining to turn.



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The rider mastered the horse, and was lashing it back towards Meg. The lady looked deathly pale, and even eccentric with immoderate excitement. She, indeed, caused the black Belgian hearse-horse to look correspondingly singular with its black reins, flying mane, and flowing tail, the lady's long black robe looking like a second mane as she galloped near.

Meg rose, afraid of the horse, for the foam at its mouth and on its breast was like thawing snow.

The lady quickly dismounted, whirled her long skirt under her arm, and held the black reins in her hand. As she approached, her dark eyes were now fierce, now tender, but wild with the light of strange thoughts. As if with inspired decision, she declared, "You're Lancashire!"

Meg stared, too surprised to reply in words; but she nodded.

"No, you're not! Not!" retorted the stranger, with the same clear knowledge. "And they call you—what?"

Meg stepped back, trying to read the deeper meaning of the dark fiery eyes of the eager woman.

"Tell me!"

"Meg—Meg Millg—"

"Wrong. *Wrong!* Oh, for the sake of the good and the bad in these glad and sad eyes of mine hide that foot!"

Meg withdrew it beneath her skirts, viewing the moorland wall, glancing at the road, thinking of escape. But the woman dropped the reins and seized her—enclosed her within her arms—kissing her—keeping her a fast prisoner in an embrace of repentant love.

Meg was more bewildered and frightened than before. She strained to get away; but soon submitted to try to pacify a creature whose hold was so firm, whose words were so passionate, and who, with a horse at hand, could follow even over the moorland wall. Lo, Meg's fear left



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her, the desire to escape vanished, the bewilderment passed away as if some spell of contact had won over her intuitions and reversed their dictates. Nay, the strange woman's soothing embrace was as if a great warm stream had joined a smaller cold one, making it balmy with sympathetic glow. Meg, indeed, experienced a physical unity of Being blending with Being almost magnetic in its soothing sway; a pacifying harmony of spirit mingling with spirit such as she had never experienced in contact with any other creature on earth. Never before, without some little repulsion of the flesh or some protest of the blood, had strange hands caressed her; but now even the nerves were pleasantly tingled into harmonious vibration and play.

With eccentric impetuosity the stranger jerked great tears from her eyes by a swing of her head, seized the reins and looped them upon one arm while she still held Meg in an embrace which in itself was an affectionate appeal to wait, to heed, to listen.

"Do not fear me! No, no. Do all as I want you to do," she urged, "and I'll give you this (she indicated her beautiful cameo brooch), and this (she unclasped a bracelet), and these," and she took off two sapphire and opal rings. Laughing strangely to herself, she added, "Nay! I'll give you—myself. I'll show you your— But come!"

Meg shrank away, violently trembling. How, how escape? But why not go with the stranger until they met some one, and then escape? Upon that impulse Meg used the moorland wall to mount the horse and sit behind this curious mistress of the lonely mountain road. Before long, however, she was riding in strange faith. The woman's words and presence soothed her, won her confidence. Like most of the fortunate creatures in Ark's fairy tales, she would do as she was wanted to do, and, like them, believe that all would come right in the end.



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They were soon riding up a winding moorland lane at an angle off the main road, and towards mountains turning purple in the evening light. They rode for two hours, and under the shadow of a craggy mountain the black horse, foaming at the mouth and sides, was exultantly whipped up a curving shadowy drive, and to the front of a battlemented house with two wings and a central square tower, gloomy in the shade of a great belt of trees and its thick covering of ivy.

"Do as I want," the lady eagerly urged, "and even this horse, nay, this house, shall be yours. Come."

Meg was hurried into a long wide room where a middle-aged man—sombre, sad, and grim—sat with three daughters.

The strange woman, like one mad without insanity, exultantly took off Meg's loose boot and lifted her skirt above her scarlet foot, calling to him in Welsh, "*Now* has the everlasting past come back!"

The man ordered his three daughters out of the room. Scared, they filed out like sorrows, glancing at the scarlet foot as at something familiar to them, but amazing in association with a stranger. He closed the door and advanced towards the woman, like a man whose passion had at last got beyond words.

Meg ran to him, kneeling at his feet, pleading that she knew nothing of the woman, nothing of him.

"Know, then," called the woman, with oratorical fervors of both body and speech, "that we are yours. I am the Princess. *He* is the troed goch—the red foot! He stamped you. He's—"

The man seized the woman. They fell against the long, low window, crashing it, and the horse outside reared and neighed. Nevertheless the woman called, "He's the troed goch—the red foot; the white lie; the black heart. Your foot is his, your life is mine."

The man pulled the prostrate woman from the broken



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window, and, as if even muttering murder, bent over her, trying to stop her exasperating words with his hands.

Two men-servants rushed in, and Meg fled down the hall and into the dusk as if from the house of all her curse. Fright gave her the intuition to risk life itself for liberty, and she leaped into the saddle of the fretful black horse, itself eager to move. Her wish was its own, and leaving the drive it cantered through the deepening dusk of the winding drive.

Any direction at all was an escape to Meg, so she left the horse to its own will, holding the saddle more than the reins.

Leaving the drive it cantered across the sounding rocky mountain road into the silence of a game track, moss and grass muffled, in a wood of pines. It was like riding a supernatural steed of blackness cantering through a dream of changing degrees of twilight, shadow, and lightless gloom—with no sound down on the earth but the rhythmic drumming of the muffled hoofs on the padded peat, and no sound above the earth but the rustle of the higher pine-needles responding to the breeze, and the remote whirring coo of luring doves settling into silence for the night.

When Meg and her charger left the wood, the night and the land were asleep together under the stars—Meg and the steed the only things awake.

The horse selected a zigzag mountain pony track. It lightly picked its way to the right and left, now and then scaring sheep and goats among the bracken, and causing lambs and kids to bleat as if forever lost.

A troop of mountain ponies dozing at some distance heard the hoofs of the strange horse. Alarmed, they cantered with indecision in a circle, looking as far afield as the darkness would allow. Then, inquisitive, they trotted to the mountain road, their horny hoofs clatter-



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ing behind Meg more like the horny feet of goats upon the surface rock.

Sniffing the darkness they galloped up, whinnied in chorus, some even squealing with almost human notes of strained inquiry as to what this phenomenal night visit to their land of stillness could possibly mean. They kept aloof, but followed at a cautious pace, neighing and snorting a mingling of defiance and doubt to the broad mountain top. Meg there dismounted. High up between the ferny mountain top and the companionable sky of active stars and setting moon she earnestly decided that she never wanted to descend again. This was the hour of hours. Tears of inner melody sprang to her eyes as naturally as notes to the throat of an overjoyous thrush. If death came to her in this hour it would seem so much a part of life that she could die without protest—with only a regretful wish of memory that those who had known her through the years of doubt should know her still better in this hour of decision. So complete was the surrender that what had happened that night, strange though it was, shadowy with some tragic truth of life—even of her life—though it seemed to be, it was past; as uneventful then as though it had never been. Never, never did she want to see that woman again; never, never that man; indeed, never any woman; never any man. She let the horse loose, gently scaring it down the mountain road to set her free from every tie of the past. She sat against a big mountain boulder. With mysterious hints of life, the side of the boulder and the ground about it were warm to her touch; and as she gazed, trying to solve this mystery, she saw the shadow of the boulder in the early setting moon gradually lengthening over her dress as if to cover her.

Was the past shut off, after all? No, no. A little Dialogue Between a Stone and its Shadow, which Ark had taught her many years before, came back to her,

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and as if young again, but with the insight of age, she mentally repeated :

“STONE: I am Substance ; you are shade.
SHADOW: I'm immortal ; you were made.
STONE: I'm material ; you are air.
SHADOW: I am spirit soft and fair.
STONE: I am fact ; you're only dream.
SHADOW: I'm the Soul of all you seem !
You ne'er move by day or night,
Lo, I travel with each light ;
Sunlight, moonlight, starlight-glow
Rising, setting, make me go
In new orbits all my own
Round about you, lifeless stone !
O'er the grass light lets me glide ;
Under you it lets me hide ;
Yes, and through the bracken spread,
Foolish bowlder still and dead !
If the suns and moons withdrew
They would dally not with you,
Me they'd take, to me they'd give
Immortal life the shadows live.”

The lulling repetition of this was sending wearied Meg to sleep. But the bleatings of two kids disturbed the spell. Then the call of the mother-goat fully awoke her, and she heard their hoofs rapidly nearing. Meg quietly turned with her face buried in the bracken, hoping that they would come and settle near to let her have the companionship of the little ones then bleating so plaintively as if to the empty air.

The mother-goat turned the corner of the big bowlder—seeking, in fact, the place it had made warm when disturbed by Meg and the horse. It stood sniffing at Meg's hair, but holding off.

One of the two kids, however, sprang upon Meg's back as if upon a familiar bank. The second kid at once did



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the same. The mother called them off with an urgent bleat. They obeyed, but took a circuitous frisky run, returned, sprang again upon Meg's back and familiarly butted each other there.

The mother again sniffed at Meg's hair, and bleated a modified alarm. The kids did not heed. Seeing that they had faith, the mother settled not far from Meg's head. The two kids settled upon Meg herself, and as this was a fuller and more humorous realization of her wish than she thought could possibly come about, she remained as still as her own comforting warm breathing would allow.

With the warming young ones asleep upon her back, Meg also fell asleep—the three of them in the one moonlight, apparently breathing the one breath and dreaming the one dream, parts of the one universe of life.

When Meg awoke at dawn the goat and kids had gone, but sheep and lambs were browsing about her, their feet pressing newly made aromas from the grass and wild thyme. Meg and the boulder were in a hollow, from which, looking eastward, she could see the moorland-like country she had tramped through. It was newly coming under the travelling influence of dawn. She sprang to her feet. Lo, westward, she saw the broad expanse of the Vale of Clwyd, far away below her, spreading out in bird's-eye perspective like a plain of woods, parks, and cultivated fields—the plain widening between two ranges of mountains, the ranges opening their arms to the distant sea.

Meg watched the dawn creep up the long wide vale like a tide of light. The ethereal tide of light flowed over wood, park, and field, toning churches, mansions, farmsteads, and even the far-off miniature cattle, into bright wakefulness.

A church clock on the mountain-side struck four, as if the chime were in a star; and the colonies of crows and



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jacks rising from the rookeries below sent up sounds to Meg as if countless pygmies were working with hammer and chisel in aerial quarries of chinking flint.

Meg saw the tide of light flood the gray wall and dark towers of distant Rhuddlan Castle, pass up the river Clwyd at its feet, greet with a flash the liquid yet kindred tide of the Irish Sea, and light the gray heads of the Great and Little Ormes into more definite form and a more purple hue. The dreamy vale below looked as if suspended in soft mid-air, so near in fancy, so far in reality, and made Meg yearn towards it, as some young British-born swallow might yearn for some distant land known through instinct alone.

She had a premonition as if that Vale were the home of her blood, of all her vague longings for something definite she had never been able to express. It seemed the primal atmosphere of her deeper life—the life of fancy and the fair romance of dreaming towards inborn ideals of desires and duties, which she alone could ever know. Even she could only know them in part. Each new day was so veiled that she could not penetrate beyond it, while each to-morrow made a promise of revelation it never was able to keep.

But though the affections of the instinct went out to that fair Vale as to a fatherland, the acquired affections of long association, when the heart was molten, turned her thoughts to Brink-o'-Dale. She turned from the west to the east. Away over the moorland-like undulations she gazed, musing. She saw Ark, Rollie, and Margit awaiting her. She heard their voices. She acutely felt their anxieties; and, weeping their tears through her own, she sped down the mountain road, craving for her only definite home in all the world.

Half-way down the mountain she met the sombre and grim man who had scared her from the hall. He it was who looked scared now, as if conscience had fled from

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his heart into his eyes and stood there red ; as if remorse had risen from his soul and gripped the muscles linking the nostrils to the mouth ; as if regrets of the spirit had mounted to his hair and turned it as coldly white as a marble slab on a tomb.

At the sight of him approaching, fear made Meg desperate. Seeing results no more clearly than a startled fawn, she ran down a dipping path, up another, down another, and into a long cave—grateful for darkness.

He followed the same paths, and, as if with foreknowledge, stood at the entrance of the cave, listening. He heard her sighs travel along the wall. She heard him enter. With a mad dash she sprang from the darkness and tried to pass him ; but he caught her. With the quelling fierceness of tragic sincerity he said : “ Love, and let love ; or you do not leave these hands alive ! Come back ; come and be one of us—as indeed you are—and God will forgive and mend it all.”

“ How do you mean ? You frighten me. Who has God to forgive ? Me ? What has He to mend ? ”

The man bent upon Meg like a life shattered upon some deed of its own as he said, “ He will forgive what I want you to forget.”

He sobbed and fell back dragging Meg with his weight, against the wall of the cave. He sank to his knees and then to the ground, panting heavily, Meg holding him, eagerly watching his lips silently moving to the words “ Forgive. Forget.” The whiteness of his hair appeared to pass down into his face ; and his lips parted motionless. Meg trembled in the presence of death, she was sure—the death of some life living in some strange way part of her own, while she, apparently by his appeal, lived part of his ; nay, in some degree died with his dying ; and almost wished that she could wholly die and so end the passionate pang that all life on the universe seemed to be.

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Nevertheless, with these convictions of mortality in her, she was flying down the mountain paths for help.

Help met her on the mountain-side, and the man was conveyed unconscious to the hall.

His first active look was for Meg. He wanted her. They were to find her. They were to bring her back. They found her and she returned.

For three days she and his three daughters nursed him. On the fourth day he was very feeble with dreamy spells of rest from which he awoke muttering, looking for Meg with eyes that seemed to have travelled from a strange land.

"It cannot be long," he said, feebly, towards night, when he and Meg were alone. "It cannot be long. No, no; never mind. Everything will do. Let us be still. Listen. The woman of the black horse was my wife—is my wife—I persuaded her to leave her people—wanderers—she was their Princess—we married and she came. Before you—yes, you *must* know it—that is why I speak—before you were born a fool's cruel pride came over me. I cast her off. I went away—she went away—wandering. I came back—she took me again. But too late. I had roused a pride greater than my own. She was changed. Changed! Another daughter came; but too late. Others; but too late. She was as changed as a lightning-smitten tree that will take nothing more from the earth or the sun or rain. I tried to find you; hoping all. But she would not help; she would only say that as sure as the dead rise again you would come at the right time; and your coming would be my going. It is true, you see. I am going. Nay, do not cry; do not let it be too late for me with you, as well! If love forgives, death will forget. Help, help me to forget!"

Meg warmly cast her arms of pity about him, raised his head, and kissed his lips with her first true kiss of



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womanly love. She might have been the angel of love and death, for when she rose from him he was tranquil and still in his final sleep. He looked as if love had indeed forgiven; as if death would see that his soul forgot his wrong.

Very singular indeed was Meg's experience after that. She stayed with the strange woman and the three daughters as if she were a fourth. Night after night she saw three scarlet feet like her own walk the floor of the great panelled room in the four corners of which they slept for companionship, in that great lone house haunted by the revisiting episodes of love, life, and death. Mother and daughters caressed her into position as one of themselves; they honored her as the eldest child; they gave her the robes of a princess; they regarded her as the healing presence of Providence for all the ills of the past: nevertheless, they could not veil her inner vision from seeing Brink-o'-the-Dale. All the poignant memories of her own past pressed upon her, crowded the rooms, and made the new home a prison of false peace. In the middle of the long sleepless nights wan faces came to her—lean, hardened hands beckoned to her—voices called to her—the very silence whispered, "Arise, arise! Come from the mountain; we weep, we wait!"—and one inspiring night of moonlight at the full Meg made her escape.

CHAPTER XXV

THE OLD ATMOSPHERE

In three days Meg was at the Old Mill House again. Ark was at his clock cleaning ; Rollie in the pit ; Tom and Tim still lodging with Margit, all vivifying the past again—Margit with her voice a little thinner and her manner more nervous, vividly reviving the past more than any of them.

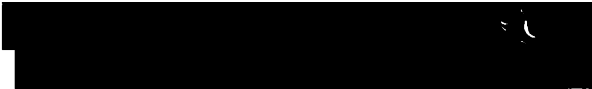
Remembering her generous impulses on the road to Holywell, and treasuring some of the words of Sister Cecilia, Meg put her mind to duty.

But, alas ! in a few weeks' time many of the old details became monotonous and commonplace. The miracle had not been performed. Doubtful old thoughts of destiny and old phases of her love returned.

To change her thoughts, Meg took to her old friend the fiddle, and how passionately she played upon it up in her attic !

Margit shook her head at this. Ark winced. Putting down a tool, one night, he cast on his hat and went out to test if the fiddle could be heard over in the churchyard where Owen Mowcroft still walked twice a week to go to the choir. Yes, it could be heard. Moreover, her shadow could be seen like a phantom fiddler on the attic ceiling.

One kind of music led to another. In a few months' time Meg was in the choir again. Not long after that she was listening again to Owen Mowcroft's impro-



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visings on the organ ; and Ark and Rollie marvelled at the persistency of nature both in her and him.

Nor was all this made more agreeable to Ark and Rollie by the fact that Owen Mowcroft, under the influence of the curate, seemed changed. In fact, this robbed them of any excuse to act. With mutual mortification, week by week, they had to witness history repeating itself in every particular but the important one that young Mr. Mowcroft was now steady.

Moreover, the old association made Meg apparently happy, so what right had they to act, or even say anything, if she preferred him to them ?

"It might be Heaven pity *us*," as Rollie said to Ark, "but we must still say Heaven bless *her* ; though the sort of angel she finds in young Mowcroft isn't ours."

One day in the following spring the curate let it be spoken abroad that he again intended to revive the old Wakes Song. Ark's thoughts doubted if there had been any past. It all seemed one continued present.

Not a word of the Wakes Song was spoken in the Old Mill House by Margit, Ark, Tom, Tim, or Rollie. But that Meg was going to take a part was understood as well as if the circular walls were placarded from floor to ceiling.

Ark tried to persuade the curate not to include Meg, to allow her to settle at home and be quiet. But the curate could see nothing but good for everybody who took part in the reform of the Wakes ; and on most nights Meg was rehearsing up in her attic.

The Wakes week drew near. Owen Mowcroft was still marvellously steady ; and the curate passed through Brink-o'-Dale streets with the briskness of a man whose project was nearing the crisis of success.

As the Wakes day approached Ark had dim fears about Meg. He noticed at night fitful flashes of ecstasy in her eyes, as if thought rejoiced over its secret plans.

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Now and then inexplicable titters from Meg gave him pain.

The night before the Wakes day Meg was out late — owing to the preparations with the curate, it was thought. When Meg did arrive, she hurriedly opened the front door, hastened through the kitchen, and sped up-stairs, looking as if she had some secret message to deliver to the stars through her attic window.

"What had she round her head?" whispered Margit.

"I don't know!" impatiently answered Ark. "I never looked."

"It were like a towel," suggested Tom.

"It were!" testified Tim. "And a shawl."

Margit sighed, "Hey, Lord! has some one been whack-in' her?—Meg!"

"No, no," ridiculed Ark. "You're always with a sigh in the gap o' some earthquake, mother. Leave her be."

"Meg! Meg!" called Margit.

Meg answered from the top of the house.

"Are you hurt?"

A trill of repudiating laughter came down. It made Tom and Tim laugh. It caused Ark to frown. Margit shook her head, expressive of a cunning insight into some sly act of Meg's. Upon being pressed by Ark, however, Margit could not interpret.

Meg's laugh roused expectation. Margit, Ark, Tom, and Tim sat listening for Meg's feet upon the stairs. But they listened in vain. Meg was too busy drying her hair, too busy looking in the glass, too busy laughing; yes, and half crying with shame, with doubt, with delight—laughing and crying over a daring effect which, according to the picture she saw in the glass, would "make a Boggart stare."

If she imagined the crowds, the curate, and especially Rollie and Ark looking on, she was sadly in doubt. Was



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it too rash? Owen Mowcroft, she was sure, would think it splendid. But the others? At any rate, it was—done! It couldn't be undone!—and she sat in picturesque position for reciting the Wakes Song, fingered her long hair as if it were flax on a wheel, and said the weaver's wife's lines with her deep voice at full play. The vibratory power of her voice thrilled her. The surprise effects of her deep chest tones suffused her with a glow of self-appreciation that gave her strength. The reciting reconciled her. She was delighted that she had dared! What she had done would force her to do her best—and she swiftly disrobed, to shake over her shoulders the Wakes Song dress of white muslin, as full and fair as a summer cloud.

“More like one of Ark's funniest fairies than a weaver's wife,” she mused dreamily, humming her satisfaction. Meg heard the door-knob touched by a sly hand. She rushed there as if the fairy were transformed into Millgates' Meg of the ground-floor. She passionately held fast the unopened door.

It was Margit. But even resolute Margit had to go down ungratified.

After that the door was bolted. It was bolted all night, for the fairy weaver wife was determined not to be inspected in her sleep.

Next morning it began to appear as if she would not be inspected awake.

Tom and Tim, who had not gone to work because of the Wakes, waited for her to come down. Ark was at his bench working; but waiting with nervous patience. Margit spent most of her time muttering between the oven where the tea-pot was and the front of the stairs, listening for unfathomable Meg. Margit knew “the queer creature was up,” for she had heard her speaking aloud and stamping about.

When at last Meg did get down, she was a mixture of

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fairy in long white muslin, weaver wife, Millgates' Meg, and an Indian chief, for her head was enveloped not in one towel only, but in two—so coiled that not even her ears could be seen.

Her cheeks were full and flushed, as if the shining smooth veil of skin over the round tarn of blood in each cheek had been burnished while hot. Her lips appeared as though the blood in her cheeks had forced an underground way and were flushing the two ruddy relief tarns of her lips to burst their banks. Her large, dark-brown eyes within her dark lashes were brilliantly gleamful with depths within depths, flashing with irrepressible fancies of humor. Under the force of a tyrannical titter her humor now and then came forth in the dumb show of an immature tear.

So excited was the creature that she could not eat. The horrid tea was too hot—too strong—too sweet! and she dropped the spoon, banged the cup, and spilled the tea.

"What are you up to this morning?" asked Tom. "What's under the towel?"

"Aye, tell us!" appealed Tim.

"You must wait like I'm waiting," said Ark, working with surprising cheeriness. "Hey, Meg?"

"I wouldn't mind telling you, Ark—in a *whisper*."

"There now!" put in Margit.

"I'd rather wait," said Ark. "I'd sooner have the fun with the rest—unless you want to tell me; then, Meg, I'm here with two ears for you!"

"I thought you'd like to know."

"And I would."

"Then know, Ark, lad," urged Margit.

"An' tell—you?" said Ark. "No, mother, I could wait a month if Meg wanted me to wait, an' enjoy it, maybe, all the more. Though—I *think*—I could—guess—it."

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"You can't!" cried Meg, sipping tea.

"P'raps I can't," Ark pretended, seeing her tragic.

"I'm *sure* you can't!" she challenged.

"Don't you be too sure," commented Tom, reading Ark's quiet smile gleaming as though it covered knowledge; "don't be too sure, Meg."

"Not *too* sure," added Tim.

"Our Ark knows, I can see!" said Margit.

"Now we'll try," called Ark, with only affected seriousness, and turning on his bench-stool to Meg.

Meg looked anxious, nevertheless defiant, saying, "Well, guess!"

Perceiving her anxiety, Ark made a guess not in the least resembling his conviction. With a forced display of profound insight he said, "You've had your hair curled!"

Meg clapped her hands with such violent enjoyment of the mistake that Ark was a thousand degrees more pleased than if he had guessed the truth.

"*You're* wrong," said Tim.

"Aye, you're *wrong*," emphasized Tom.

"He's—not," called Meg, for Ark's sake.

"Meg! Meg!" muttered Ark, in friendly reproach.

"Don't *you* believe me?" she called, as he pretended to work.

"I'll take your word," he answered, without looking round.

"But is it curled?" asked Margit, seriously. "Was Ark right?"

Meg turned from the table, tittering.

A messenger at the door announced that the curate, the organist, the horse and cart, and a crowd were waiting for Meg at Mason's shed.

Covering her coiled towels with a shawl, Meg started off. Then she hastened back to Ark on his bench-stool. She put her arms completely around his neck and whispered,

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"Come and see, Ark. But don't be vexed. I only thought I'd give them fun."

"I'll come, Meg! I'll come."

Off went Meg; off went Tom and Tim; and Margit and Ark followed.

Ark and Margit were panting with anxiety when they reached the fringe of the mischievous merry crowd in front of a spring-cart. The cart was decorated on the outside with flowers, and on the inside with Owen Mowcroft disguised as a gray-bearded weaver. The curate was in office standing on the cart-shaft.

By mounting two big stones Margit and Ark were in time to see Meg ascend a ladder and helped by the curate into the cart. The curate had tried to persuade her to uncover in the shed, so that she would have mounted in full character; but Meg, believing in surprise, refused, and her grotesque piled-up shawled head set many a waggish tongue at work.

Margit and Ark were ashamed. They dreaded to look. They dreaded to listen. And yet they did both with the intensified keenness of beings who had a creature of theirs at stake.

Everything was now ready but Meg. The curate and Mowcroft looked at her, waiting. In one resolute act she twisted the shawl and towels off—and down fell her long unbound hair dyed a keen, glaring scarlet. The wind spread it the more glaringly in view, and the sunbeams more brilliantly illuminated its singular tint, like the gossamer petals of some vast brilliant poppy, having Meg's deep blushes and dark eyes as its dusky centre.

She looked unearthly, weird, gruesomely beautiful, like some witch of red water strangely astray on land.

The noise of the crowd fell like a wind. Then it rose like a gale of groans, roars, hisses, and laughs, tempered by only a little applause.

Meg herself stood utterly ashamed. And no wonder,



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for the crowd laughed collectively like one huge being with many heads.

The curate appealed for order, but it was too soon, the groans and yells were not half spent. An attempt to raise counter applause failed. Meg's eyes filled, and Ark pushed through the crowd and mounted the cart. Seizing the shawl, he stood upon the cart-seat and tried to whirl the covering over Meg. But she twisted away. She even stood on the defensive, her face saying, She had done no wrong; she had meant well. Nevertheless, she was trembling almost into a sob of exasperation over a wild mistake.

The crowd wanted the fun, and seemed, after all, to take her part by howling at Ark to come down. But little Ark would not. The curate used persuasion; but in vain. Then Owen Mowcroft imperiously ordered Ark off.

The order reached Ark through the mock weaver's beard with a rank smell of rum. He sprang round, tore off the big gray beard and hair, and, as it were, lashed the young man's face with the old one. The old weaver so suddenly looked young, with signs of his former great age only on his ridiculous white, woolly eyebrows, that the laughter was easily turned. Even the curate lapsed into a titter. Meg alone looked with a frown, and that was at Ark.

Margit, aided by three waggish men effusively willing to assist her, now mounted the cart and passionately tugged Ark to come away from the tom-fool-play-actor show. But Ark stood his ground and called,

"Meg, you're not going?"

"I am!" she said, against her own deeper wish, and turned to the curate for support.

The curate put his hand on Ark's shoulder, and reasoned with him.

"Aye, send him down, mester!" shouted a man. "Send him down!"

THE OLD ATMOSPHERE

"Come off, you dimity mother's own humpty-dumpty son! Come off, and let the fun begin!"

Owen Mowcroft was refixing his wig and beard.

"That's right, Mester Mowcroft, put on the old man again."

"Aye, he's a dang sight better lookin', old nor young, hid away in all yon wool. He's a more decent weaver nor a pit-office gaffer."

"Well done, dimity Margit! Well done, bantum mother! He showed thee the way up; thee show him the way down."

"Turn him out!"

"Come down, you four-foot-three of a man!"

"Make him the Punch of the Judy show!"

"Tip him up, parson, an' we'll catch him on the little finger."

"See, I'll hold my vest-pocket for him."

Ark again appealed to Meg, but she shook her head, turning away. The crowd boisterously applauded her decision.

Ark went close up to the curate and shouted through the din, "Do you believe me now? Ev'ry puff off him is poison. Are you going on with it?"

Before the curate could reply Rollie Rondle and another young fellow mounted the cart-wheel like two thieves, seized Ark by the jacket, and passed him down to two others. With the humorous jeers of women and men fully bent upon the new holiday fun, he was passed along the line to the outside of the crowd.

"Now men, order please!" called the curate, as master of the ceremonies.

"Order! order! you women!" echoed the men.

"Aye, they always talk longer and laugh louder nor any other kind o' folk."

"Listen to Tyke Higgi'son," answered a woman,



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“shoutin’ from the inside of his Sunday clothes so as parson will look at him.”

The scene on the cart silenced this banter.

Owen Mowcroft, again disguised, was spinning flax on an old hand-wheel. Meg, as his wife, was working not flax but her scarlet hair to and fro in her hands. Then for the first time they all saw that she had a justifying fancy. The crowd listened intently as the old weaver began :

“It’s Millgit wake, an’ we’re comin’ to town
To tell you o’ somethin’ o’ great renown,
An’ if this owd jade will lem mi begin,
Aw’ll show you how hard an’ how fast aw can spin—
So it’s threadywheel, threadywheel, dan, don, dill, doe.”

To this Meg, with a pitifully low, trembling voice, answered :

“Tha brags o’ thisel, but aw dunna think it true,
For aw will uphold thee, thy faults arn’t a few ;
For when tha hast done, an’ hev spun very hard,
Of this aw’m well sure, thy spinnin’ is marred—
So it’s threadywheel, threadywheel, dan, don, dill, doe!”

WEAVER.

“Thou saucy old jade, thow’dst best how’d thy tongue,
Or else aw’ll be thumpin’ thee ere it be long,
An’ if it aw do tha’rt sure for to rue,
For aw can hev many a one just as good as you—
So it’s threadywheel, threadywheel, dan, don, dill, doe.”

WIFE.

“What is it to me whoever you can haive,”

(Meg said this touchingly.)

“Aw shanna be long e’er aw’m laid i’ my grave;”



THE OLD ATMOSPHERE

("Poor lass!" called an all-absorbed old collier, working his gums.)

"An' when aw am dead an' aw've don what I can
Yo' may find one as 'll spin as hard as aw've done—"

("Well done, young un!")

"So it's threadywheel, threadywheel, dan, don, dill, doe."

The crowd applauded; so did the curate; and Meg blushed a scarlet in wonderful keeping with her hair.

WEAVER.

"Come, come, my dear wife, aw'll not hev thee rue,
An' this aw will tell you, an' aw'll tell you it true:
Now if you'll forgive me for what aw hev said,
Aw'll do my endeavor to please you instead—
So it's threadywheel, threadywheel, dan, don, dill, doe."

WIFE.

"Aw'm glad for to hear it, you will me forgive,
An' aw will do by you as long as aw live."

(Ark bit his lip pallid.)

"So let us unite an' live free from all sin,
An' then we'll hev nowt to think at but spin—
So it's threadywheel, threadywheel, dan, don, dill, doe."

BOTH.

"So now let's conclude, an' here endeth our song—
Aw hope it has pleased this numerous throng;
But if it has missed, you needn't fear,
We'll do our endeavor to please you next year—
So it's threadywheel, threadywheel, dan, don, dill, doe!"

The applause was emphatic. Even Margit was won over by Meg's surprising cleverness. The scarlet hair



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did not now seem so glaring. Indeed, the general verdict was that Meg had done "a most devilish curious thing; yet all right, after all; an' far more sensible to look at long than Mester Mowcroft's jim - crack make-believe whiskers an' brows."

The cart started to go on its rounds. Margit followed it as a sheep follows a cart containing its lamb.



CHAPTER XXVI

ARK'S EXPERIMENT

ARK wildly cut away, passed the works, crossed the humpy black waste-land of a colliery, and did not stop until he reached the Blue Beck. There he leaned against the hand-rail of the bridge.

Ringin in his head and repeating itself upon his tongue were the words said in Meg's tremulous voice: "Aw will do by you as long as aw live; so let us unite an' live free from all sin, an' then we'll hev nowt to think at but spin—"

Rollie suddenly sang from behind and to a tune of his own:

"So it's threadywheel, threadywheel—"

"Oh, stop that, Rollie!"

"Dan—don—dill—doe! You don't see the fun of it, Ark! Arta comin' on?" Rollie asked, pretending to move down-stream.

Ark did not answer. He sat earnestly thinking. He had heard his father and old Daddy Hawksworth speak of second-sight. He longed for it there. He wanted to see beyond the day. He wanted to see the future of that young Mowcroft.

"Are you comin', lad?" called Rollie, casting stones into the Blue Beck as he moved along. "Arta?"

"No."

"So it's threadywheel— You can't mend it, man. She



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began with a scarlet foot ; she's scarleted her head ; and she'll go on scarletin' till her's scarlet all over."

"You lie, Rollie !"

"So it's thready, threadywheel— Why, even her mouth's more scarleter than it was. Dan—don—dill—doe. She came from dye, an' she'll live dye. Aye ! an' die dyed. Come on with you !—an' let's watch the fellow, if you *are* thinkin' that much of it."

"I've watched more nor enough—"

"So it's threadywheel, threadywheel, dan—don—dill—doe !"

Rollie moved down-stream and away.

Ark still leaned against the hand-rail, gazing as if true second-sight had indeed come. "What is the *real* metal o' that Mowcroft, I wonder ! What does he mean with the lass in the end ? What does he think now ?"

To try and see young Mowcroft in the future, Ark pictured old Mowcroft. He shuddered. He growled. For the first time in his life Ark tortured his brain to try to realize with theoretical sensations what a fellow of young Mowcroft's stamp really thought and felt when drink was in him.

Ark hit his knee and stood upright.

"Hey, but I've an *awful* mind to !" he courageously muttered with vigor. He reflected. He struck his left hand with his right. He shook the two hands as if in sacred compact with himself, saying, "Done ! I will !"

He crossed the Blue Beck bridge, walked with resolute little strides up to Brink-o'-Dale, and, for the first time in his life, into the Mill Stones Inn.

"A shillin's worth o' rum in a bottle," he said to Kitty, the pretty young Lancashire witch at the bar. She hesitated. "Oh, I mean it !"

"Who is it for ?"

"Give me a shillin's worth o' rum in a bottle !"

ARK'S EXPERIMENT

"Has Mr. Mowcroft sent you?"

"Who? Oh no, lass. No. But why? Has he had too much already?"

Kitty said, "Yes, he has! Is it for him?"

"No! Pass me the poison, lass—and take pay out o' that."

With the bottle in his breast-pocket, Ark hastened home as if with a potion that would reveal the secret sensations of another's evil soul.

The house was locked. He'd walk to Boggart's Head Wood. No, he might be found! Outside, too, he might do something strange. The experiment would have to be made up in his own room. Yes, and in the middle of the night. But midnight was twelve more hours away! Impatient, he at once started for Boggart's Head.

As Ark surmised, Boggart's Head was deserted. All the people were down on the Brow, or still lower down in the Dale.

He entered the wood. It was like a doomed wood a wood of blight. Not one tree was alive; not one branch of oak had a leaf; not one branch of fir a needle. All the trees from the trunks to the branch tips were coated with gray scales of lichen. The lichen in turn had died upon death. Even the bracken roots had rotted. Rank drippings from the dead trees had killed them. The whole place was dead—and yet dying more unto death, for on the ground and up the trees was the incessant death-tick of twigs which the sun broke or the breezes snapped.

Ark stood. He looked about and listened. The snapping of a distant branch made his heart jump as if death had knocked too loudly at nature's door. It would be curious, thought he, if while he was—possibly—helpless, a big branch snapped or a tree fell and killed him. After all, was the experiment a wise one?

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"And yet I'm bound to know what Mowcroft's inside gear is like at full work."

His eyes ranged to the left and right again.

A stray magpie passed over the wood.

"Dang it!" he muttered, withdrawing his hand from the bottle in his breast-pocket, for in defiance of his will the first line of the old magpie rhyme, "One for sorrow," rang like a shuttle through his brain.

Another magpie passed over. He muttered gladly:

"Two for mirth."

But a third at once followed.

"Three for a wedding. A—wedding? A wedding?"

A fourth magpie passed.

"And four for a birth!" A birth? His hand flew like a magpie into his pocket.

"If it's wrong of me—God forgive! I only mean well!"

He jerked down a large dose, hid the bottle in his pocket, and deliberately sat—unreasonably expecting revelations at once.


"W-ell!" he stuttered aloud for companionship as a violent cough caught his breath. "The first thing it does is to cut a chap's throat on the inside! But," he silently mused, "that's to your credit, lad. It shows you're not used to it. But, heavens!—now, as I think—I took it green, raw!"

"Hullo!" he said, meditatively, as if addressing his velvet waistcoat, "are you down there already?—like a tadpole o' warmth wrigglin' into the best o' the vitals!"

Here was sensation indeed, and he lounged more definitely, with a fallen tree against his back.

He looked like a dwarfed Faun—the last curious sleepless spirit of the dead wood, at last reconciling itself to death.

He moodily gazed; but he was more within than without, noting with futile anxiety the momentarily



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changing phases of his five senses. Five? He discovered a sixth—that of an inner eyeless sight, by which distant people and near things were perceived in vivid separation from the earth, as though they were airily suspended in glass globes, which, while more clearly displaying them, gloriously magnified them. Without knowing it, or hearing the result, he clicked the fingers and thumbs of both hands. He was delighted. This, this was a telltale sensation indeed! Lord! Lord! His heart turned kettle-drum, marking double-quick time for the muffled march of eager mesmeric feelings from the lower regions to the higher. Some of the feelings on the way to his brain lost themselves in his eyes, and tried to get out.

Quite abruptly the fallen tree he was leaning against appeared immeasurably long, grim, gaunt, lonely, and pathetic. He was sorry for it. It, in turn, appeared sympathetic—sorry for him—he clutched it—murmuring consolations, and yet wishing to be consoled.

With a grotesque transition he perceived the comforting presence of humor—in himself, in everything. The sad dead trees might have been uttering soliloquies of wit, or appreciating some of his, the way he smiled with a personal directness at individual stumps. But not for long. As if becoming irrecoverably enveloped by increasing layers of mental and material wadding, he thickly mused:

“If—young—Mowcroft’s—anything at all like—to this—he— isn’t a bad sort, after all. I rather like him. He can take a joke and give a joke. He’s a friend o’ mine! Give us your hand, mate! Done! If this is how you feel, lad, I can understand it all now—Mill Stones Inn an’ church; pewter-pot an’ organ; a sort of liquorish religiosity holding service inside your vitals; aye, lad! making you feel music in all your organs; an’ hymns, an’ Our Fathers, an’ Amens, as if instead of you going



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up to heav'n, heav'n's come down to you, an' you don't
care a devil for ought. I know it now lad !

“Little Robin Hood
Stood in Sherwood Wood
Up to the neck in blood
Callin' Oh ! Tallyho, Tallyho !”

Ark's active illusion obliquely caught sight of Meg—a blurred sight—a kind of second-sight twice removed. She was up among the bare branches as in a transfiguration, more like an embodied vision of fancy than a fact. He was sitting absolutely still, gazing with peer- ing intensity ; and yet he was under the illusion that he had risen, that he was approaching her, and that to authenticate her, he daringly thrust forward his face near hers—and she vanished. His vision became inverted. With no more concern about sequence than in a dream, Ark beheld himself. He did not speak, but he so vigorously mused that his musings seemed to him to shout from a spiritual self within to a material self without. At that outside personage he shook his fist, and disturbed the planetary gyrations of a suspended universe of gnats.

“I know you !” he soliloquized. “You're Ark Millgit. Look you here, you little orange-hearted fool, if you let drunken young Mowcroft squeeze th' juice of you and harm *her*—I'll harm you ! She's young—God bless her ! She's bonny ! But she's strange. Hey, Meg, Meg !” he cried aloud, and rose. “You have my life, heart, soul, an' body in your hands ! I love thee, love thee, love thee ! I love thee three times three, I do. Oh ! I'd wed thy little finger if thy bonny face alone were in the pink o' thy pretty nail. I love thee o'er an' o'er mysen ; o'er an' o'er body an' soul ; o'er an' o'er life an' death, right away into the other side o' things. Aye, more than it



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seems right for a mere mortal to do, more than a mere mortal can bear !”

Whirling upon one heel, he fell face downward to the earth with a sob. Clutching crackling rotten twigs in both hands, he cried out, but with his voice muffled by the rotten mould :

“O God, up in heaven outside me, if Tha'rt good as they say Thou art, give the lass some love o' me ; or else here ! tear my love of her from out o' this flesh, blood, an' bone ; and let me die.”

He breathed heavily, muttering wooingly for some time to the earth as to a being. Then he groaned as he rolled over to get free of a sensation that seemed to elevate his body into the clouds but sink his soul into the dust. He rose in flight. He could not safely stand, nevertheless he stepped out now to the right, now to the left, and yet as if wildly longing to follow a direct line towards any escape from himself.

He soon looked as if in passionate pursuit to avenge some wrong. He knocked against trunks, struck low branches, tripped over roots, fell in deceptively soft hollows of faded moss, stumbled over stones, tumbled into the skeleton meshes of dead briars, and at last sank exhausted with a bleeding gash in his hand.

In ignorance of all he had done or was doing, he felt his beating brow, and thus marked it as with a crimson brand of Cain. This had a grim appropriateness, for the earth under him seemed a symbol of foul young Mowcroft. He attacked it like some moral animal at last in possession of bestial prey. He hoarsely growled, “If you feel as I feel now with this wild flesh all over me—I'd rather end Meg than let you have her. By Gollia's grip, young Mowcroft, it's a pity you were born to think of her. If I had your father's throat in one hand an' yours in the other, like to this, in two minutes you'd both be asking the devil for water. Oh, you may



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cry 'Murder!' I'll cry it too. Murder! Murder! I'm not ashamed of it. Murder! Take that, you drinker up o' my Meg!—Aye, it were me as did it, mester. I give mysen up—an' with all the pleasure o' life an' death."

Ark's strange cries had been vaguely heard at a little distance—heard through the mystifications of *extra rum* in young Mowcroft. Tottering, muttering, and fluttering, young Mowcroft, like a moth in search of flame, went in search of sound.

It was only by a drunken man's luck, however, that he found the prostrate figure. Mowcroft dimly realized that it was Ark. Like a thief mesmerized, he tried to withdraw. But the shadow of one of drink's many preliminary deaths overcame him. He was helpless. He involuntarily described a semicircular whirl which tripped him as completely alongside of Ark as if he had designed it. He was dazed beyond thought. So was Ark. They both slept deeply, heavily, side by side—the experimentalist and the expert alike.

In a short time the dead wood of Boggart's Head was alive with people and police. Old Mr. Mowcroft had been found dead—murdered—in the cellar of Broomhey.

Ark awoke with the grip of a policeman shaking him. Sobered, he saw young Mowcroft apparently dead by his side, and his own hand smeared with congealed blood. He moaned and hid his face. But soon he stood up, dazed, but ready. A dark recollection told him that there was now but one way in all the world for him.

Here, apparently, was crime upon crime. Ark was marched away. Young Mowcroft had to be carried, for he was unconscious, and more limp than the newly dead.



CHAPTER XXVII

MEG AND OWEN MOWCROFT

THE coroner's inquiry into the death of Owen Mowcroft's father was held in the long, narrow upper room of the Mill Stones Inn. Before the proceedings began the most conspicuous figure was Meg, isolated in spells of uncontrollable sobbing, giving her the appearance of being the one most vitally concerned in all the results.

Near her, as a voluntary protector, was Rollie Rondle. But he looked no more capable of being gallantly active in that place than a great growing melon could be active over the sorrows of a withering melon-flower. He was there, and that was all.

As a witness, Meg was shortly isolated in another room.

Very soon the place became uncomfortably crowded. It seemed to be particularly so when stout Mrs. Dootson, nursing her baby—Granny Grimes, Mrs. Meakincroft, Widow Kershaw, Sal Thornton, and Becca Bateson walked in. By sheer dynamic force of sex and wit they ousted as many men from a Mill Stones Inn bowling-green form. Shortly after this the coroner arrived. Near him sat the curate, like a favored guest.

Through the consideration of a county police sergeant, Margit sat on a three-legged bar-parlor stool, as near Ark as four constables of the law would permit. Ark looked haggard and feverishly distressed, for he now hardly knew what hold Fate had upon him. Owen Mowcroft looked as if he partly knew, but did not particularly care.



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Even when Owen Mowcroft's sister Sabina approached the table like a craped, world-worn, weary creature of long domestic depression, he stood as with his feet on ice and his head in an atmosphere of bracing frost. Fate could do what it might. He did not care.

At the first sound of Sabina's low, tremulous words, Ark turned his head away from a sight that added new pangs to hearing.

Sabina Mowcroft could only feebly describe how she found her father dead, after she had returned from a walk.

"Can you throw any light whatever upon your father's death?"

"N-o."

Kitty Dewhurst, of the Mill Stones Inn, approached the table like a young light-comedy actress exiled from the stage owing to the want of engagements, but now enacting tragedy on the more exacting platform of real life. She knew the son of the deceased? Yes. He was her lover? Not exactly. Had she seen him after the Wakes Song came to its sudden conclusion? No. Sure? Quite sure. Did she know Arkwright Millgate? Only as a customer on the Wakes day.

"You never did!" called Margit from her three-legged stool.

"Order, please," said the coroner.

"Order! order!" the policemen interpreted, smiling.

"Well?"

"He came for two glasses of rum—"

"Never in this world!" called Margit. The police closed in upon her.

"You swear it?"

"I do."

"An' I'd swear as he never did!" called Margit, jumping from the stool, as if ready for the Testament.

"Now, my dear woman," said the coroner, looking her wav. "you are not a witness at this inquiry—"

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"I'm a witness for the life-long knowing of my own son!"

"I don't wish to—"

"I don't believe it of the lad. He never did."

"Husht, mother," called Ark.

"She's lyin'! My Ark's father were tee—"

"Husht, husht," appealed Ark from behind his guard of police.

"You husht! You know no more o' yoursen this last day or two than a kitten knows it's a cat."

"Officers," said the coroner, severely, "we must have silence."

"I thought you wanted speech in a court—and truth—and—"

Two policemen hustled Margit to the door.

"Gently with her," appealed Ark from behind his guard, and Margit called:

"If yon twelve give the verdic' that our Ark took two glasses o' rum, I'll raise th' country!"

The officers, tittering, hustled her through the doorway; but on the staircase she concluded to the officers alone, "His father were staunch teetotal five-an'-thirty years up to the hour of his death, an' the son's of the self-same stuff, confound 'em!"

Margit, as subdued as diminutive, was soon up against the tall stout officer at the room door with her lifted hands making coaxing tugs at his belt as she appealed:

"Let me in agen, mester! I'll be good. I will, as true as tha's got a man's heart behind thy bobby's coat. I'll not let spill another word. I'd leave my tongue with thee if I could. Now do! The whole world to me is t'other side o' that door. There's nought this side of it worth a breath. See! Here's my pocky-hanky. I'll ram-jam it fast i' my mouth, if that 'll satisfy thee that I'll sit as dumb as a dummy."

He opened the door, winked to the officer on the other



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side, and smuggled Margit into the shadow of the corner. She was no sooner closely fitted in there than she wept a silent flow of gratitude.

The sound of Meg's voice at the table arrested Margit's tears, but left the last ones unwiped upon her cheeks.

"Sh!" impatiently called a policeman to some whisperers remarking upon the indefinite color of Meg's partly hidden hair, the paleness of her brow and cheeks, and the darkness of her sunken eyes.

The coroner abruptly asked, "When were you last with Owen Mowcroft?"

"On Wakes afternoon."

"Tell us what happened."

"He helped me to wash the dye out of my hair."

"Where?"

"We climbed the wall into the dye-works. He said he knew the wash."

"What time was that?"

"I don't know."

"Come, come, you must know the time you were in the dye-works! There's a clock there."

"It struck four."

"What took place after the washings?"

Meg looked down. With a sigh, her pale face seemed to draw up its lost original color from her heaving bosom.

"Well?" asked the coroner.

A tear fell with a splash upon the table she was leaning against.

"Come; we must know."

With a quivering lip she said, as with pathetic memories of now historic regrets—

"He—he wanted to kiss me, sir." She hid her face.

The fierce look on Ark's brows as he scowled at Mowcroft caused an extra officer to step between them.

"Well?" said the coroner to Meg, as if through her

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handkerchief and hands. "Look up, please. What happened?"

"I wouldn't let him—"

"Yes?"

"And we quarrelled."

"Why wouldn't you let him?"

Meg did not answer.

"I am sorry to press it. Why, on that particular occasion, would you not let him kiss you? Had he ever kissed you before?"

Meg nodded, losing color again.

"Why not then?"

Her teeth secured her lower lip, and she swayed to and fro.

"Wasn't it because he was in drink? Come now!"

"Not *because* of that."

"Then why?"

She hesitated.

"Answer."

"Because I thought of somebody else."

"Aye—*me*, and *Ark!*" muttered Margit.

"And you quarrelled? What about?"

Again Meg did not reply; again her color rose to her face.

"You must really help us. This is most important. What did you quarrel about?"

"*That*. I told him he was again getting like his father."

"And what did he say?"

Meg answered slowly, "He—cursed."

"Give the words. We must have them. Don't be afraid."

"Oh, damn my father, and you." Meg vainly tried to muffle her sobs in her handkerchief. "Then," she said, through her grief, "he left me."

"In the dye-works?"

Meg nodded.



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"To climb over the wall yourself?" asked the coroner, with a personal interest over and above the official.

Meg sorrowfully nodded twice.

"Did you see him after that?"

"Only being carried on a stretcher from Boggart's Head Wood."

"That will do," said the coroner, in a half-satisfied tone. "Stay," he added, as she turned to leave. "Have you ever heard Owen Mowcroft speak with threats about his father?"

"N-o."

"The next witness," said the coroner, and Meg left the room.

The next witness was the doctor. There was nothing inconsistent with a death from natural causes, possibly accelerated by a fall. There was a mark over the region of the heart, but that might have been the result of the fall.

The police gave evidence of the singular arrests; and the coroner, cautioning Ark, asked him if he would like to say anything. Before he could be sworn, Ark said, from the centre of the police guard, "Well, sir, I bought two glasses of rum."

Margit screamed, hopelessly disillusioned, and was pushed out of the room.

"I did; and that's the truth. I then went to Boggart's Head Wood, an' that's all I know."

Owen Mowcroft was asked if he had anything to say. He shook his head.

The jury returned the open verdict of "Found dead."

To the surprise of many innocent ones this did not liberate Ark and Mowcroft. They were taken back to Garsbrook police-station, three miles away.

Next evening a policeman called at the Old Mill House, and pointedly delivered into Meg's hands a sheet of blue foolscap.

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"Mester!" called Margit after him. "What sheet o' blue mischief is this?"

"Witness summons — Garsbrook — next Thursday," said he, turning off.

"Hi! What's the chance with my Ark, mester?"

"I don't know, woman. Let the lass here go and say the best she can."

"She can only say the truth," opined Margit, grieved that there was so little of it.

"That's all as is wanted," called the officer, as he went.

"I wish to my heart that *were* all as is wanted. Hey, Meg, Meg, I'm fair funny with it all, what with the beginnin', middle, an' end. And we're only in the middle of it yet. Our Ark two glasses o' rum!—our Ark taken up—our Ark in Garsbrook jail!—and now the police-court—and, they tell me, maybe Manchester 'Sizes. An' *all*, you must remem'er, *all* on it all through you!"

To Margit's surprise, Meg swept her within a swift embrace of the most passionate remorse.

"What," asked Margit, in tones muffled against Meg's dress, "what did a pit-manager want taking up with—you?"

"What! What!"

"An' him a church-organer. He ought to have played a better tune nor this."

"Oh, I know it—know it. I know it all—too well!"

"Not too well, lass—considerin'," said Margit, strict even in the very heart of this unprecedented fact of an affectionate embrace from penitential Meg. "Not too well, lass, considerin'."

"Considering what?" cried Meg, hugging the little figure still closer to her bosom, which just then seemed the agitated physical expression of her intense desire to understand and help in any way she could.



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"Well—considerin' it may all hang upon *you*." Margit pressed back her tears in a fold of Meg's dress. "Aye, *hang* upon you; on your word! Mark that. *Hang!* Poor Ark! Oh Lord, it 'll *kill* me, out *an'* out! I'll never live through it! To think as he may be guilty or not guilty, hung or not hung!"

Meg embraced Margit's neck harder.

"Hey, Meg, Meg, you may well hug an' tug an' tug an' hug, for you've put some sort o' rope around *my* neck with all this. To think as it may hang on a word or two inside o' your mouth instead of out of it!"

Meg moaned a most sorrowful comprehension of this.

"So when you go afore the justices you tell *all*. You didn't, you know well, at th' inquestin'. So they said. If you know who did the mischief, Meg, dear lass, in the name of the dead man and the living God, say it out!"

Meg broke into renewed violent grief.

"Aye, speak out, lass—and the Lord and all of us love you! If you can't yourself, you tell me, and I'll give it 'em as straight as a spindle o' steel. Good conscience, lass!" cried Margit, freeing herself and standing as rigid as if she had become all bone, "what's yon dog barkin' at *our* door? That's a—cry—o—death. It's maybe our Ark's *call*. If you won't listen to me, listen to *it!*"

Meg twisted away and ran sobbing up-stairs to the attic where the sunset afterglow made the room look like the interior of a rose.

Margit followed half-way up, but Meg called with a wild, passionate command, "Stay down, stay down!"

Hearing Meg's room door bolted, Margit sat on the stairs opposite the door of Ark's room. She was agitated, bewildered, muttering in a state of high mental tension and physical collapse. Feverish and luring bodings tempted her to open Ark's door and peep in. She



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started back, and closed her eyes fast. Then she ran up-stairs, calling, "Meg! Open!"

Meg opened the door. Her arms received Margit, trembling and murmuring like harp-wires, as she cried, "I've seen Ark's double—black-cap and all!—and hanging!"

"No, no," said Meg, with the assertive tone of a new protective strength.

"I can speak the truth from my own eyes—surely."

"Where?"

"His room."

Meg sped down, running quicker and quicker through the darkening twilight to keep her courage. She pushed open the door—and saw Ark's black coat and hat hanging on a nail. The clothes, so still, unoccupied, and mute, had a more spiritual appeal to the spirit than if Ark himself had been there. She entered, and on an impulse of affection she grasped the sleeve at the wrist and tightly held it in anticipation of the welcome home she hoped to give to Ark. As she stood there, indeed, Meg prayed for Ark—for Margit—but most of all for herself; yearning for love enough to think only of them. The gentlest tears of retrospect sprang to her eyes. She stood as if gazing through the tears to a future in which tears would not be shed; and she pictured it coming about through some great, indefinable action of love of her own. She slowly went up the stairs, now darker, for the afterglow had dimmed.

"You've seen him, too?" called Margit, in the gloom. "I can tell by the star-look in your eyes!"

Meg could not affirm nor deny. She there and then realized that in her own way—yes, and somewhat in Margit's strange way, too—she had indeed seen dear Ark with an eye of faith, and touched him with a hand of love in a way that never had so mysteriously changed her pain into a tranquil passion of peace on the verge of

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perfect joy. No power for sympathetic expression came to her but through a kiss, and stooping over Margit she gave the second caress she had given to the strange little woman since the return from Wales. The caress made Margit herself tearful, and she gratefully said, "I understand, love lass—I understand. You'll speak out, I can see; I can feel! Something from yon fresh stars o' this new night tells me that you'll be Millgates' Meg again in real solemn witness-truth; aye, with the whole truth, an' nothin' but the truth, to help your God; and God to help you!"

As if from these curious words, the wildest passions of regrets streamed in upon Meg with remorseless reproaches that seemed supernatural in their haunting power and sway. Feelings were flooded forward with tidal force as she re-embraced Margit and cried, "I'm sorry to the heart I ever came back. I have caused it!" She stood aloof to express her one inevitable idea of going away. "Only for me all this terrible and horrible trouble would never, never have come!" She turned away dazed, yet gazing at the increasing stars.

"Well, Meg, as you put it so, truth's truth, an' the devil can't be shamed with lies."

Without turning round, Meg resumed, "I came—for your sakes. But for your sakes I ought to have stayed away; hidden myself—far off in Wales," she cried, with keener pain as she turned to Margit. "I ought to have died there!"

"Lass, lass! Not *that*."

"Died there. As I've lived there."

Margit looked at her inquiringly, then turned her face away to clear her eyes of any possible illusion, and looked yet again, muttering, "As you've lived there? Meg!" she said, with decision, as Meg bent her face to her hands, "somethin' more nor yoursen is speakin' to yoursen. Thee listen. Thee heed."

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"Far away—up on that mountain."

"Mountain?" Margit involuntarily muttered, like an echo alive.

"Or in that cave."

"Or in that—cave?"

"Or in that house with *him!*"

"House with him?"

"Or with her!"

"Who? How? What d'you mean?"

Meg continued as if apart from the presence of Margit.

"It's as if some wrong isn't finished; it's still in me; as if I must finish it wherever I go."

"Somethin' queer *is* speakin'. I never did see you more to the life-an'-death likeness of—your own mother."

The word mother seemed to be mesmeric, for Meg shuddered and her dark eyes glowed as with a frenzy of kinship and blood.

"And her very eyes," muttered Margit.

"I *am* my mother."

Margit breathed more within than without as she thought, "And her voice!"

"*He* has died," murmured Meg, as if the one ordained hour for full revelations had come. "Died; but he still dies in me. She lives; and still lives in me. Living or dead—in him—in her—in me—the curse curses on. Oh, God! God!"

Margit made a quick and large sign of the cross upon the semi-darkness with her arm, and nerved herself with all her shaken powers to have courage to wait for whatever this unexampled mood of Meg's might reveal. This was the moment of the years. Humid beads ran down Margit's brow as she watched Meg's face when Meg called to the sky through the attic window:

"Yes, the curse goes on! I could go away this moment with it, only—my own doings would still be upon Ark—and you."

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"Well done, Meg! Bless thee!"

"Going wouldn't free him."

"No, no; stayin' an' speakin' out would. You tell all at the judgment, Meg, as you're speakin' out now. Tell *more*, nor all to get the lad home. The other *deserves* hangin'."

"He does—not," solemnly answered Meg. "He's dying *his* father's death, as I'm dying mine."

"Let him die it, I say. Hangin's good enough for him. But poor Ark—my poor Ark!" cried Margit, twisting her hands and turning aside.

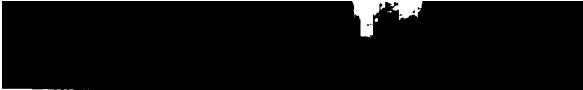
The cry went deep into Meg's opened feelings, and for more than earthly relief she gazed out to the sky. Her ideal star of the Sacred Heart sparkingly pulsated within the bosom of night. Star-like thoughts pulsated within her. Her bosom warmed with them. "If death is but another form of love," the thoughts said to her as if she were outside of them, "of what concern is life to you? If love is not love even to the suffering of death, of what value is the love? If life to you means death to those two, of what avail is life?"

"I almost wish," she mutely answered the thoughts, "that love had never been; that life had never been; that death had covered all. But that is not so! I live. By my life those two are troubled. Perhaps by my life they will die. By my death they would be free of me. By my death they shall live! Remembering me, all will love, all will be friends, all will be well!"

"I'll tell the judge!" she passionately cried, startling Margit from her grief. "I'll tell him! I'm the guilty one—I did it all!"

Meg sank her face upon her hands.

But even as Margit screamed her new terrors into echoes that rang down the stairs, Meg's face felt false against her guiltless hands. She knew that God knew



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that she had spoken a lie. Defeated and duped, she called, advancing to Margit :

“No, no ; it is false—false—”

“But you've said it !” answered Margit. “Put no blood's hands on me !”

And Meg tottered backward in a swoon.





CHAPTER XXVIII

A SURPRISE

In a few days all the excitement was concentrated in Garsbrook police-court.

There, to the amazement of everybody but Margit, Meg, as if dazed in a sobbing, deathly dream of irresistible destiny, confessed that she was the cause of the crime.

"She's not knowing what she's *at*," muttered Tom to Tim.

"She's *not* knowing what she's at," whispered back Tim.

"Poor body!" added Rollie Rondle. "Look at her fingers going threadywheel, threadywheel. I do believe she just pitched on it there an' then. She may mean it in *one* way."

"She *may* mean it in one way," ratified Tom. "But not in the court way."

"Not in the court way," added Tim.

"The magistrate's talking to the clerk," said Rollie. "She's booked, sure enough. Didsta see how Ark glimmered white as she spoke?"

"And Mowcroft ran red, smiling?"

To Meg's bewilderment, a solicitor at very short notice confronted her in examination with a most complete biography of her past life all the afternoon and evening of the day. Then he asked her during what particular moments she was in two places at one time, doing two very different things with one hand.

A SURPRISE

Meg could not summon up a single fighting answer. She had not even resistance enough to confess that she was the cause of the crime in the sense that had she pleased Owen Mowcroft in the dye-works instead of vexing him, it might never have happened.

"The fact is," proceeded the solicitor with a familiarity born of his success. "The fact is, in the goodness of your heart, you thought you could rescue your lover from the awful position in which he finds himself to-day."

"Pardon me," smartly interrupted a solicitor watching the case for Ark, "it has yet to be proved that the identical prisoner you refer to—Mowcroft, I presume?—is her lover."

Meg flushed grateful for the mere kindness of the tone of protection. Even a little courage came to her.

"Is or is not," promptly asked the prosecuting solicitor, "the prisoner Owen Mowcroft your sweetheart?"

Meg slowly shook her head.

"Speak up, please," commanded the magistrate, with his two hands to his ears.

"N-o, sir," answered Meg, glancing at the friendly solicitor, as if to be prompted.

He smiled back encouraging approval.

"Then who is?" demanded the opposition.

Meg bent her head.

"Will you answer my question, please? If the prisoner Owen Mowcroft is not your lover, who is?"

Ark's solicitor appealed, "Your worship!" but the magistrate discouragingly shook his head and looked at Meg, awaiting her reply.

"No—one," muttered Meg; and Ark's solicitor turned to him, nodding professional consolation to the effect, "Never mind! At any rate, Mowcroft is not."

After all the evidence had been taken the magistrate decided to dismiss from his mind the idea of committing



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Meg on the capital charge. Hers was the confession of a young woman so palpably misguided by her feelings and by her innocent delusion that she could solve the whole case by a false statement, the actual results of which to herself and to others she had not evidently coolly taken into account. But the court ought to be protected. She would have to be committed on a charge of perjury. The other cases also would have to go before the jury.

Meg was almost imperceptibly taken into custody by a policeman in plain clothes. Ark and Owen Mowcroft were removed to the cells in advance of her. She broke down, crying aloud at her failure; and hearing her, Margit gave way; and Tom, Tim, and Rollie Rondle bore Margit between them to get her to the air outside.



CHAPTER XXIX

THE PRISONERS AT THE BAR

AT the Manchester Assizes in the following month, the judge at an early stage of his summing up said that in regard to the prisoner Arkwright Millgate he did not see any evidence connecting him with the crime. The association was peculiar ; that was all.

Both Tom and Tim, stooping simultaneously, interpreted this favorable point to Margit. Margit's two arms simultaneously clutched their necks and she dealt Tom a loud kiss. The usher of the court solemnly intoned "Silence!" and a policeman indicated the door as the way of all interrupters.

"Sure-ly," called Margit, "if I can't kiss my own an' the judge, I can hug my nearest!" and even the policeman slyly chuckled in her favor.

It was very different in the case of the prisoner Owen Mowcroft, continued the judge, as if he had not said anything in the least momentous. There was suspicion, there were threats, there was irritation, there were undoubtedly the saddest domestic influences at work. Nevertheless, there was no direct evidence. Even the circumstantial evidence was stronger in feeling than in fact. It was for the jury to say how far that feeling was the legitimate result of the few facts before the court.

Without leaving the box the jury found Ark not guilty—the door of the dock was opened for him—and



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Margit's wail of welcome as her arms closed upon him was the cry of a broken heart made whole.

The jury left the box to consider the case of Mowcroft.

When they returned they could not agree. They were sent out again.

Once more the jury came in, this time looking hot and fagged.

"We find the prisoner not guilty, my lord," said the foreman—and the first to shake hands with Owen Mowcroft, a free man, was Ark.

Margit, however, averted her glance from Mowcroft, for she was convinced that he had the dread power of "the evil eye." She even held on to Ark's sleeve in the hope of checking his contact with something so direful that it required no more than a glance to effect its evil wish, and in a confusing flutter the court emptied, everybody jostling somebody else and yet no two persons apparently together.


There was soon a new kind of flutter in the court. Meg was in the dock, but the judge was speaking to counsel in provokingly low tones.

His lordship muttered something about "put back" and "to-morrow." Very soon, Meg, under the puzzled gaze of Tom, Tim, Rollie Rondle, Margit, and Ark—Owen Mowcroft in his excitement had gladly escaped to the street—was led from the dock to the cells; and the court quickly emptied.

"Put back?" said the little Brink-o'-Dale group, but unable to get much out of the curious legal whim.

Early next morning Meg was quickly found guilty of perjury, but with an exceptionally strong recommendation to mercy; and when the judge sentenced her to a day's imprisonment, which she had already served, a buzz of grateful surprise hummed in the court.

Meg walked out of the dock and was soon joined by



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Owen Mowcroft, feverish and haggard after his own narrow escape. Where were the folk from Brink-o'-Dale? wondered Meg, as several strangers, who gladly perceived that even the prosaic law could sometimes end with poetical justice, walked abreast and heartily congratulated them.

Their anxiety, however, was to get away. With an appearance of slyness, they hastened along the main thoroughfare, stealthily turned into the first minor street, down a yet minor one, and up the narrow passage of a second-rate eating-house.

Chance seemed to box them together in the gloom of two high-backed settles, Owen on one settle, Meg on the other, and a narrow, white-clothed table between. Their mutual gratitude for freedom was so new and deep that that tranquil experience of each other—face to face, and yet unseen by anybody—was the most wholly happy they had ever had together.

Meg glanced at him. She was too keenly aware of his earnest look peering from his wan aspect of recent fright. She pitied him more than she could venture to express or even show, and bent her head.

Quite out of his ordinary way Owen Mowcroft allowed Meg to keep her head bent and undisturbed by any bantering action or word of his. Watching her bent head, indeed, he had the feeling of attending a service in which he took a layman's part with more sacred appreciation of her emotion than he had ever felt. He almost knew that she was feeling that his future now depended upon her more seriously than ever. So clearly did he surmise this that when he was ordering breakfast for two he purposely showed that his own appetite morally hovered between coffee and beer, and invited help. A clear decision on his behalf stood in Meg's sunken eyes, and he formally decided in favor of coffee.

When the meal was over, Owen Mowcroft leaned for-



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ward on his elbows, fingering his fair mustache. Now and then he nervously nibbled the tips of the hairs, between his teeth. For a change he dangled the ringed cruet-stand on his ringed little finger. He moulded the salt with the spoon. He tried to make the round-topped pepper-holder stand on its head—Meg sitting back in the corner of the settle, sympathetically interpreting each simple act done for doing's sake.

Now and then his blue eyes glanced speakingly at hers. They were hinting some question as yet too momentous to be put into words. His restive blue eyes became so clearly the windows of the mind troubled with some thought, that Meg felt that if she stood closely and peeped through she could see the thought at work. Meg became uneasy. She wished that they were both safely on the way to Brink-o'-Dale. She had, however, a feeling of security in the fact that he still looked sad.

And yet, looking sadder than ever, he leaned more forward upon both elbows, and whispered in a low, appealing murmur like a thrill:

“Meg! come and get married!”

Quick flashes in place of tears gleamed in her eyes. “Oh no!” she appealed, rising.

“Sit down,” he said, petulantly, and yet with instant regret.

“Let us go home.”

“Listen! Listen!”

Meg sat, repeating, “Let us go home!”

“I daren't.”

“Why?”

“Well—I daren't.”

“But why?”

“They'll never have me at the office again.”

“I'm sure they will. Try!”

“I'm done for—done for *there*.”

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"If you'll come and *try* them at the office," she said, daringly, "I *may*—some day!" but rose, as if no command would make her sit again.

He also rose. They went out, Meg leading the way. It was Meg's will also that led the way through the busy thoroughfares.

"Where are you going?" he at last asked.

"To the station."

"I'm—not!" He stood.

She walked on—glad of her freedom of will.

Before she reached the ticket-office, he passed her, took tickets, and joined her. They caught the train and travelled to Garsbrook without a self-justifying word from him or a defensive word from her.

Outside of Garsbrook Station, when taking the road for Brink-o'-Dale, Owen Mowcroft laughed. It was his nearest approach to words. He shortly added, "Well, we *are* fools!"

Because of that she walked in good earnest for home.

"Let's take Bardle's Ommi'," he said, as the familiar rickety-sprunged, one-horsed box on wheels creaked behind them. In fact, Mowcroft signalled to the driver to stop.

But Meg shook her head, and resisted to even glance. Bardle's Ommi' started again, Owen saying, as he overtook Meg, "You needn't have made them laugh at a fellow!"

"I want to walk—I want to get home."

"They won't expect you!"

"Why not?"

"They think you've more spirit. So did I."

"You're cruel."

"Not as cruel as you are."

"How?"

"Forcing me to a place I don't want ever to see again."

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"I'm not forcing you."

"That's like a girl."

"How?"

"She does and she doesn't; she will and she won't."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, give me a bit of grit—pluck—"

"For shame! Shame!"

"Why, little Kitty's worth—"

"She isn't!"

"Why, she'd—"

"She wouldn't!"

"In a moment!"

Meg bit her lip. Sobs quivered to rise, but she held them at bay. Her heart, however, beat as if it were one of her sobs in revolt, thudding her side. Oh, how was it? Why was it? Didn't he love her enough to keep him from being cruel? Kitty, no doubt, *would* run off with him—and make him a thousand times worse.

Without looking up she took his hand, saying, "Don't speak like that. You don't mean it."

"I know this—you haven't half the courage you used to have."

"You—you—you'll make me wish I never had any," she answered, trying to take away her hand from the grip of his; but in vain. "Oh, I do wish—"

"That I was five thousand miles away?"

"Why can't you be kinder?"

"Kind? Heavens! Don't I want to be kind? What's offering what I have offered but being kind?" To give point to his question he stood, freeing her hand, looking at her.

Meg could not look up.

"It is kind—only—"

"Another 'only'! One more 'but'! Heavens, Meg, you're getting worse. Do you *want* me?"

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"I want to want you—if you'll only—if you'll not seem as if you don't care what becomes of—both of us."

"I don't care a snap what becomes of myself!"

"That," she said, now gaining courage to look up, "isn't kind to me. You ought to care."

"Now, Meg, Meg; don't let us get sentimental. We're past that. You know very well I don't mean to be cruel. There's not a girl in all the world I'd be kinder to—if we could get out of that confounded Brink-o'-Dale! Should we go to it?"


"I must. And you come! Do!" Meg completed the persuasion by lifting her face with the old yielding.

He laughed, put his arms about her neck, and received from her the frankest kiss of persuasion her lips had ever given to woman or to man.

"Look here, Meg," he said, "you keep to the road and I'll go round by Bank Hill. It will be better for me. You needn't fear. I'll not run!"

The moment he had disappeared up Bank Hill Lane, Meg uncomfortably felt that that kiss had been too frank, kiss of persuasion though it was. He once again possessed more of her than she ought to have given. And yet he had taken it flippantly, she thought, as though he had no idea of all the deep purpose that the giving meant to her. But if it would only send him home, all might be well.

The word home caused a pitying thought of Ark to pass through her, around her, under her, over her, like a haunting, dumb appeal muffled in the air beyond sight, hearing, or touch; and yet immediately outside there—in the breeze—in the light—in the shadows of the trees; yes, in a longing warmth of affection that made her glow with serener feelings than Owen Mowcroft ever inspired. Home? Ah, she did not deserve all the half-ashamed devotion of Ark; all the quiet kindness of Tom and Tim; all the winning affection of Rollie Rondle. She



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did not deserve even the queer love of queer, suspicious, and superstitious Margit! Home? She could almost run away on her own account now, so ashamed was she to assume to have a place in that home she had so often almost spoiled.

CHAPTER XXX

OPINIONS DIFFER

MARGIT, Ark, Tom, Tim, and Rollie Rondle were told at the Manchester Assize Court that Meg had left with the young gentleman who was in the dock on the previous day.

The five looked at each other as if they had been tricked, and hastened to the station. While travelling on wheels they were silent and grim; but as soon as they reached Garsbrook and were on their legs to walk the three miles to Brink-o'-Dale, Margit said:

"A good thing I left the key with Mrs. Dootson to see to the fire, in case Meg turned in first. I had a feelin' o' this. I wish something quick would clear yon Mowcroft out o' Brink-o'-Dale. I do so! And now more nor ever."

"Aye," said Rollie Rondle, "if he wouldn't take anything else with him." And all at Rollie's lead increased their pace until Ark and Margit had to put in three of their short running steps to two of walking. "If he hasn't taken her—already!"

"Look here, Tim," said Tom. "Give us your left hand, and stoop down a bit—and now, mother! Back thasen on to our arms and we'll give thee a lift."

All laughed but Ark. He grimly steadied his mother into position at the back while her short left arm did its utmost to reach around Tom's bent neck and her right arm around Tim's.



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"Right, Tim?" asked Tom, before raising his back.

"Right."

"Up she goes then!" and Margit was suddenly lifted off her feet. The physical elevation became emotional, for she screamed. That became spiritual, for she exclaimed:

"It's like going up to heaven!"

"But it isn't a chariot o' fire," said Rollie Rondle.

"Why," added Margit, full of ideas, "it's like childer and Queen o' the May!"

"Aye, we must put posies on you," said Rollie.

"But you must not!" answered Margit. "I'd think I were being taken to my grave. . . . This is worth having, lads. It's taken something like a ton-weight off my feet. If some one could only do the same for my head, I'd feel rested head *and* heel."

"Well," said Rollie, "there's only one way o' restin' your head—that's by hangin'."

"Then I wish you'd rest your own! Leave yon hangin' talk behind. I've had more nor enough on it. I do wish we were home. Yon scared lass! . . . Where arta, Meg? Where, lass?"

"Oh, she'll be there before us," muttered Ark.

"You can't reckon on her, Ark," replied his mother. "She has a eel's twist in her. Don't get hoping too much. I keep sayin' to mysen her isna in front of us; her isna at home; so that if her is, it'll be more than I expect."

"An' yet if her isn't," suggested Rollie, "you'll be ready to break up your very own head."

"I wish you'd leave my head alone with your hangin' an' breakin'! What next?"

"Walkin' on it with delight if the lass is at home."

"What are you iffin' and iffin' at, Rollie? I never did see th' like o' you men folk. You never can think all the one way—Ark's one way, and you're another. Look at me!—I think one way an' stick to it."

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"But you're only one woman, Margit."

"I'm as good as two—in opiniyon!"

"Good!" cried Tom to Tim. "Good!"

"Aye, in your own opiniyon," said Rollie.

"Own, lad? Whose else would I have? If I had yours they might make a weather-cock o' me at once."

"Nay, 'twould be a weather-hen, Margit."

Tom and Tim chuckled, so that Margit shook as if on carriage-springs. Joining their chuckles, she answered:

"Well, they'd have to make a four-arm'd north, south, east, an' west lettered iron of thee, Rollie—pointin' four ways mornin', noon, an' night; an' always away from the right road, too."

"From the right road?"

"Well, didsta ever see a north, south, east, an' west point up?"

"Of course I have," said Rollie—"up north, as folk say."

"Ah, but up, proper, lad? Paradise isn't up north, silly!"

"Why not?—judgin' by contrast. One place hot an' t'other place cold. 'Twould be a paradise for such as young Mowcroft to leap from a hell-flame on to a heavenly iceberg! Hey, Ark?"

Ark did not answer.

Margit sighed, saying, "I wish one of *us* were a weather somethin', to tell which way th' wind really does blow at Brink-o'-Dale this moment."

A silence fell upon them all like a dead calm. They might have been travelling at night in the East, they were so mute.

Far off levees of larks were being held over the fields to the right and left, but the travellers did not hear them. They seemed to be listening to thoughts, fears, and fancies.

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Tom, with the forced emphasis of heavy breathing, at last said: "Take my advice, Ark, an' leave Mowcroft alone. He's a wastrel. Give him the cold shoulder."

"More like the hot one, with a knobby fist glib under his pinkin' nozzle," amended Rollie.

"Hey, lors, stop that kind o' talk!" cried Margit, impatiently jumping down. "Thank ye, lads, for a rare lift!"

"The fellow's to be pitied," said Ark.

"It's a pity he couldn't be pitted; aye, coal-pitted!" cried Rollie. "I'd like to sew him up in a pit-seam, an' give him plenty of jigger nigger-dust. If he had more on it he'd maybe see as we got less—though it's a sight better after that plan o' yours, Ark, of turning the old Broo Shaft into an air-hole. Hasta done ought with the double catches?"

"What double catches?" alertly asked Margit.

"Hey, Rollie," said Ark, "if I could invent a double catch for your tongue, there'd still be overwinding of words with you."

"Well, Ark," answered Margit, "it makes up a bit for your underwindin'. What is it, Rollie?"

"Only a big balloon of a secret as I daren't prick by tellin'. These inventors are such particular chaps. And no wonder! If they speak, somebody snicks up the idea in a snap."

"An' if they don't speak," said Margit, "somebody has it out afore 'em. Look at yon rope-wheel thing of Ark's. That were snicked up. Pooh! It's of no use pretendin', Rollie. Meg must have told Mowcroft o' that, an' he used it."

"Well, I've a patent idea, Margit," said Rollie, "that I don't mind any of ye knowin'. A good idea, too, I can tell you! I've been thinkin' on it for some time. Months. An' it's a sort o' double catch in its way; for a sort of overwindin', too. But for the overwindin' of

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the wrong chap's arm around the waist o' the wrong wench. It's this: if young Mowcroft dances around Meg again, we ought to double-catch him on the hop o' the tip—top—toe."

"Aye!" cried Tom, laughing. "Aye!" followed Tim.

Ark quietly remarked: "Think what you like, say what you like, do what you like; after all, the fellow's to be pitied, I tell you. Look at the father he had. You can see the father *in* him."

"Just why it should be knocked *out* of him!" said Rollie. "And you've gotten non' o' your father in you, or mother either—hey, Margit?—if you go oilin' his fault."

"I should think not!" warmly responded Margit.

"I wonder if they'll keep Mowcroft on after all this?" said Tom.

"Bless your soul, they'll take him into paytnership now!" said Rollie. "A chap as can cheat the hangman can cheat ought. I believe th' devil himself would give him a berth as top-manager now. An' with good reason—if the chap with the hoop an' horns wanted to give a fillip to the torments of the damned."

"Talk sense, Rollie," said Ark.

"I'll give you a jolly good common-sense smack in the sou'west o' thy head, Ark, if your uncommon sense lets Mowcroft wheedle over you, even if he is manager."

Only Tom and Tim laughed.

"Why, shake my stars," roguishly cried Rollie, "if you want Meg, take her!"

"Silly!" said Ark. "Silly! Talking of—take!"

"Take her an' have done with it!" Rollie chuckled as he added, "if it's only to save young Mowcroft winnin' her from the likes o' me and Tom and Tim here! I could stand you doing it, Ark; but, by my last breath, I couldn't stand him! Why, he isn't worth one twink

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in her eye. And yet, sithee, Ark, sithee, I'll bet you a finger-nail against a breeches-button that the two on 'em's made a run for it. Run !"

"Where's your fists, Tom and Tim?" called Margit. "If you won't strike Rollie for yoursens, strike him for me! I wish my hand could crack his head."

Rollie chuckled, saying, "A finger-nail to a breeches-button !"

Ark slowly replied, "I—wouldn't—let—my—right—hand—bet with my left—on—her."

"Oh—ho ! List to Ark !" replied Rollie. "List to Ark pretendin' ! A pity you weren't walkin' inside out, Ark, so that we could see th' size of your heart every time you think on her !"

Margit worked sudden vengeance on Rollie's big calf with her clog. He sprang forward like a goaded young bull, and with something of a bull's affected roar.

"Kick one your own size !" he laughingly called. "But honest, Ark, honest," he added from a distance, "honor bright, in dead earnest ; buckle up !"

"Do, Ark, lad," said Tim.

"Aye," finished Rollie, with a needful bit of fun—"aye, she thinks a deng sight better of you, Ark, than she does of me, confound it ! I'd marry her Sunday apron-string to-morrow, only I know it wouldn't have me."

"Unless it was to tie your nonsense up !" said Margit, as they entered Brink-o'-Dale.

They found faithful Mrs. Dootson looking out for them from the doorway. She answered their gazes of inquiry by a satisfying nod, and an indication that Meg was up-stairs.

Ark wiped his brow, forced out a long breath, and opened the back door for air.

Margit sank sitting on a low stool, bent her head low, and her teeth dithered like a kettle lid as she gratefully muttered, "Sarah Ann ! Oh, Sarah Ann !"

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Tom and Tim sat on the front door-step looking out, relieved.

Rollie Rondle went to the foot of the stairs. He listened with so much imagination that he whispered across to Margit, "She's hummin' a hymn, I do believe!"

"She came in, Margit," whispered Mrs. Dootson, "gave me a smack of a kiss till you'd have thought her had crack'd me cheek; an' then slithered away up-stairs afore I could say 'Meg, lass, how do?' And there all the words as I had pat ready to say to her are on the tip o' my tongue yet, like cakes for folk as don't turn up for tea."

"But—she's—*in*," thankfully remarked Margit, without looking up. "She's in!"

"She's hom'd, as our Charlie says over his carrier-pigeon. She's hom'd, Ark. Now, then, you four lads come and sit round. Come, Margit, and have a snack. You look wantin'."

"What about *her*, Sarah Ann?" asked Margit.

"I'll take her a cup up there," whispered Ark.

"You take tea-*pot*, Ark," cried Rollie. "I'll tak' tea-*cup*; an' Tom an' Tim the double tea-*cake*; while Sarah Ann an' Margit here are gnashing their teeth sayin' grace afore meat, after meat, and in the middle o' meat."

"She's had it up already, clever un," answered Sarah Ann to Rollie. "But I didn't stay to see her, Margit. I heard her take it into her room—an' that were as good as church-music to me."

"Aye!" cried Margit. "An' God bless thee, Sarah Ann! Sarah Ann!—God bless thee, body an' soul!"

CHAPTER XXXI

A DILEMMA

"COME, Ark! You're eating next to less nor nothing!" exclaimed Mrs. Dootson, with severe hospitality, as she, fairly circular herself, slowly walked around the round, large table in the centre of the round kitchen. She was acting as hostess-waitress in place of Margit, having heated herself into the complexion of a toasted tea-cake first by the preparations and then by taking her tea in advance. "You're eating next to less nor nothing, lad!" again cried Mrs. Dootson. "What ails you? The lass is at home, and what more doesta want? Look at Rollie Rondle there! Why, he'd eat just the same even if he were going to wed our Sallie in the morning."

"Now, then, Mother Dootson," answered Rollie, "you can do as much of the courtin' for me as long as you like, but don't wed a shy, single-minded chap like me to your Sallie or any other lass, quite so sharp as tomorrow. No, no; don't. (Just pass the bread-and-butter, Tim, when your busy hand has time). No, no, Mother Dootson, don't you go an' murder the bachelor in me at an afternoon's notice. I want to have mysen no mysen just a bit of pleasure longer nor that. Is there no pickle spice in Margit's cupboard, Mrs. Dootson?"

"Didsta ever hear the likes," said Mrs. Dootson to Margit, "from a lad not in his own house?"

"I think," said Margit, "we've had enough of both

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pickle and hickled-pickle for some time. But get it him!"

"Nay," said Rollie, "I were only larkin'. But I wouldn't mind just a wee little on it—just a helping taste—my appetite's surly an' sulky to-day. Thank ye, Ark, I'll try the toast to be goin' on with."

"Now, Ark, eat yourself," urged Margit.

"Nay," said Rollie, "not himself. Let him try this toast. Ark, try it, lad. Another cup o' tea, Mrs. Dootson. Thank you, mother—yes, barrels of sugar!—cows of milk! and more nor a pot o' tea—for I'm fish more than I'm flesh or fowl to-day, I'm so dry!"

"Give us a bit o' time to think, Rollie!" appealed Margit, as she observed Ark trying to combine eating with listening. Now and then he seemed to be listening even with his eyes eagerly set in the direction of the stairs. "Give us a bit o' peace, do!"

"Of course I will, Margit. Here's the piece of toast for thee. Here! Take it. Make yourself at home with your own. What, Tom! Your hand out on the bread-an'-butter again? And yours too, Tim? I tell you two what it is, lads—when it comes to you two *talking* as much as each other it doesn't much matter; but when, if *one* takes and tucks toast, the *other* takes and tucks toast; if *one* gobbles a drink, the *other* gobbles a drink—I tell you it's hard handicappin' against a single-mouth'd chap like mysen. It's a sort o' double-and-quit I don't like. Barley me that kissin' crust! Pass it, Tom. Thank you, lad. It's a pity you two couldn't play double at passing. Then I'd have two kissin' crusts instead of one."

"I put it there for you, Rollie," said Mrs. Dootson.

"You'll go to heaven yet, Mrs. Dootson. What sort o' knife didsta butter this wedge o' bread with?"

"Why, lad?"

"Well, I wish you'd beg, borrow, or steal the same

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knife from Margit to butter the bread with at your own house. It must be a more good-natured knife than any of yours. Though, of course, this butter's not your own, and that makes a difference ; for a chap as is fillin' his pipe from another chap's pouch, always rams in the 'bacca too tight for smokin'."

"I think you're rammin' your pipe pretty tight," said Margit.

"Aye!" followed Tom.

"Aye! aye!" doubly echoed Tim.

"You keep your four eyes on your own consciences, lads, and give my conscience a chance to get a meal. It hasn't the chance of gettin' Mrs. Dootson to deal out other folks' vittals every day. Has Margit any plum jam anywhere, Mrs. Dootson? May Sallie's mother look, Margit?"

"Pity help your Sallie's cupboard, Mary Ann, if she ever does wed Rollie."

"Hey, bless you!" cried Rollie, deftly doubling a length of bread-and-butter, "when I'm wed, whoever it's to, I'll be above meat and drink then. I'll live on meals o' love—a rasher of a smile for breakfast, a small elbow-joint of a hug for dinner, a chop of a kiss for tea—"

"Aye!" called Mrs. Dootson, "an' a fight for supper."

"But Rollie Rondle will never wed," said Tom.

"Never, never, never!" rippled off Tim.

"Well, there aren't three nevers, Tim. You an' Tom may want two betwixt you ; but one's enough for me."

"There's no such time as never!" called Margit, with abrupt, fiery earnestness. "It never *is* never ; an' never will be! And time is nothing to make nonsense of. What was, is. What is, will be. Look at the lass, Meg, up-stairs. She were found—she lives—she goes on livin'—she makes us a part on her—we're somethin' different to what we'd hev bin if her'd not come'd our way.

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There's nothing that has a never ; but ev'rything has a ever an' ever !"

"Amen," broke in Rollie. "Meal-time hasn't an ever. Just give me another cup of what was an' is, Mrs. Dootson. One of Margit's cups as has a ever an' ever ! There's eternity in my thirst, at any rate. I'm with you there, Margit."

"Now, then, Rollie," called Margit, with strained feelings, "you be careful what you're talkin' about. Think o' time, Think o' things. The shortest time is always next to the longest ; the smallest thing is always next neighbor to the very biggest, because 'tis next to nothin' ; an' nothin' is bigger than the biggest thing because it covers it ; for nothin' covers everything, everywhere. Even the world, Rollie, lad, is in the inside o' nothin'. Hullo ! There's a journey on the inside o' my cup, for some of us, I see. What does yours say, Ark ?"

Ark, for the sake of being quiet to listen in the direction of the stairs, allowed her to take his cup. "No" ; she said. "What does yours say, Tom ? Let me see. And yours, Tim ? Nothing clear for either on ye. And yours, Rollie ?"

"Lor' ! Oh, Lor' ! I've just swallowed a tea-leaf like a helephant's ear ! Can you reach *it*, Margit ? Do ! In heaven's name, do !"

"Husht ! List !" said Ark, rising. He ran up-stairs. Meg was not in her garret. Ark went into another room, and then rushed down, saying :

"Meg's gone !—through the lower window," and, thrusting on his hat, he ran through the back door-way into the garden, followed by the rest.

A heap of clothes under the lower room window disclosed Meg's device to break her fall

"Lors—a—me, Ark !" sighed Margit. "I thought you were somehow dead-of-a-heap with her, livin' though you are to th' senses."

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Ark ran up the garden and out, Margit and the others following. "Ark, lad, Ark!" she called across a field.

He dipped out of sight. She reeled, faint, and would have fallen only Tom caught her, soon aided by Tim, while big Mrs. Dootson pathetically panted forward sideways, like a paddle-steamer with only one paddle at work, and that disabled. Rollie had made off in another direction.

Ark's proved the keener instinct. He followed traces of Meg's shoes as far as a disused quarry. The entrance and floor were strewn with moss-green sandstone blocks like the results of some pre-historic giant's prank.

He leaped over the blocks straight to a dark, ivied cave in a corner. Meg was there like a trapped fairy in the light and darkness of a natural cell that had never been peeped into by man.

"Meg, Meg!" he murmured. "Don't be afraid. I won't bring them."

Meg turned away, hiding her face, thinking of Wales. Here was another cave; here another appeal.

"What's wrong, lass? What's wrong?"

Meg pressed her fingers harder against her face, and an unbearable cry of "Go, go!" forced through.

"Nay, dear, dear lass! Don't, don't! What ails thee?" he appealed, going to her side, patting her arm.

She had not heart enough either to resist or encourage. She simply stood like so much inactive humanity; and yet his deepest longings longed more than ever to do their utmost for the troubled, wandering creature he loved and pitied with such solemnity of life.

"What *is* it that is wrong, Meg!" he implored. "I'll do anything. Anything you set your wish to! Say it, Meg! Whatever it is, trust me. Come home, and I'll turn stones to bread afore I'm done. I've two inventions waiting at Manchester, an' th' first that takes—"



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"No, no," she cried, through her hands pressed still harder to her face. "I've given myself away—away!"

"Away? How? Meg! How? Oh, lass!"

She did not reply.

"What do you mean, Meg, love?"

"God help me!"

"Is it still Mowcroft?"

"He wants to be different. But there's that Kitty!"

Meg passionately pushed forward past him, leaping the mossed stones, and making away as much fleeter than Ark as a bird is fleeter than a short-legged hound.



CHAPTER XXXII

SISTER AND BROTHER

LATE that night Sabina Mowcroft was finally locking the side-door they always used at Broomhey when she heard a footstep on the narrow side-path. It was so like Owen's usual nightly return that quite as usual she unlocked the door, opened it, and stood behind it. This time, however, she opened the door as if for an irreclaimable human alien who insisted upon having his legal share of home.

Quite in his customary way Owen passed through without a word. Sabina, as usual, locked the door and, as usual, followed him down the passage and into the room on the right. This time, however, the customary rank exhalation from a sodden cigar-stump, supplemented by the rankness of recent spirits, fired her long endurance into sacred rage.

Owen was about to cast himself backward with affected, heedless heaviness into his easy-chair near his rack of black pipes, but Sabina strained herself upright and sternly called :

"Owen—wait !"

He did not turn to her, but the polar point of dread thought may be said to have turned quivering upon the axis of his brain towards her.

She saw a glint of the side of his face like a pallid crescent. It was so sharp-edged and haggard that she herself was surprised into pity. She pitied him, however,

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not as a brother—no, no—that now seemed impossible—but as a human being up against one of the ultimate situations of life, and unequal to face it.

But haggard-looking, forsooth? That was how she and her mother had felt for over twenty years. With a nerved strain of firm indignation, Sabina said:

“We must understand each other. You know all, Owen. And I know all.”

“All what?”

“What, owing to me, never came out. ‘Not guilty,’ indeed!”

He descended into his chair, jerking himself bodily to face the wall.

Sabina’s finger and thumb clicked with passion. Apparently growing in stature, she called:

“To-night I mean to be heard if I never speak on earth again. Rise, this moment, and listen!”

He shrugged one shoulder in protest.

“I know who I am dealing with, what I am dealing with, and where. Rise, I say!”

He rose, affecting by a shake of his head to make a man’s concession to the usual hysterical woman.

“You may shrug—you may sneer—I’m a long, long way past all that. You shall not treat me as a sister, now. Nor as only a woman, either. But as some one who has a right, you shall. Oh, you may curse—and growl—and stamp. I know all. You were seen. ‘Not guilty,’ indeed! Ann Jane saw you, and for your sake she left us and ran away.”

His eyes twisted askew in their sockets and stood fixed. Under the double strain of gruesome old thoughts taken by surprise and new thoughts trying to think, he endeavored to face her; but failed, and turned still farther away.

“Come under this roof, in the way you *have* been coming, in the way you have come to-night, *and I tell all!*”

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"It's—a—a lie!" he shouted.

His own lie, however, seemed to choke him. He panted like a dry hound.

"Do not try me—much, even now. Father bent me; very little from you will break me." Her thin face and even her thin hand took on a lean, white hardness as she pressed her grayish hair as if to press down her thoughts. "Beware!" she cried. "Trifle one hour longer with poor mother and me, and as sure as there is breath behind what I know—I speak out!"

He mumbled an oath.

"Trifle, and I speak out! Right out!" she cried, feeling cooped between the ceiling and the floor with an evil still provokingly alive in his flesh and blood. "You may curse. You may swear. You may stamp through the floor to hell itself and snarl all the villain that you are, but you shall not crush me again."

In violent exasperation, unlike himself even at his worst, he grinned at her and clawed the air with one hand, as if mimicking what he would do if she provoked him. But the act was too horribly reminiscent of his deed of deeds, and he thrust both hands to his brow.

"Oh," said Sabina, with a defiant calm upon her, "I'm not afraid now! No, no! God help me, no! Though father killed mother—killed her—if she lives twenty years after him, he killed her little by little—remember, you—shall—not—kill—me. I defy you!"

His dried lower lip quivered.

"Oh, the number of poor fools of women that one man crushes! Have done—have done with it! How many more of us are you going to spoil?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, with a pitiable effort to cloak thought even from himself.

"I mean Martha Roseby—"

His lip was suddenly sucked in as if as a substitute for his tortured ear.



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"Who crushed *her*? Who turned *her* brain? Where is she now? Where you ought to be—chained to her in the asylum over there."

"Rot—rot—*rot!*" he rumbled on his tongue, with a desperate effort at irony—the irony, however, embittering his own despair.

"Mean? I mean that daughter at the Mill Stones Inn. I mean that girl they call Millgates' Meg. I mean my own mother—dying. Yes, and I mean myself!"

"It's—it's—" he stuttered — "it's not *all* my fault. Good God! *I* didn't make myself; I didn't—begin it!" he cried, with a child's weakness and yet a man's defiance. His right hand shook at his side beyond control. The trembling spread up his arm to his frame. He appeared as if a quiver of apoplexy had taken hold, and with a moan as of a conscience muffled, groaning for full repentant release from his will that was still smothering it, he sank with his life's keenest agonies deep into his low chair. "A—drink—" he gasped.

Sabina suspected him. It was one of his tricks.

"A drink!" he repeated.

"You must promise. You must make a promise, down there, *where you left father last!*" and Sabina flung open a door revealing the dark space of the cellar stairs.

He hid his face in the corner of his arm and answered, "I promise—here—now."

"You've promised and promised here—how many, many times!"

"But this time I will, Sab. God's truth!"

Slowly and sadly Sabina shook her head. In moral torture she appealed, "Don't, don't! Your truth has never been God's truth. You've broken it how often! Promise down there—and I'll believe you."

"Oh, tell!" he shouted, in reckless despair, and with a

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fiendish contempt for the very worst of his fate, he thrust between his lips the mouth of a glass flask.

"One—drop!" called Sabina, stepping nearer and pointing the finger of doom at him, "and I confess—I report—all—this very night!"

His hand paused. He was thwarted, without even the resource of rage. He was again abject—again hunted down—again in the coils.

At the sight of it a gentler moral splendor softened Sabina's severity like light about a cloud which nevertheless carries a thunderbolt.

She quietly appealed, "It will be better—for you—for me, Owen."

"But why not believe me here?"

"You know why."

"There!" he cried, between rage and repentance, crashing the flask on the hearth. "Never, never again!"

Slow, dull footsteps sounded on the cellar stairs as if in response to the rising odor of rum. As he heard them his eyes turned like touched snails in their shells. His eyelids closed upon them and his head dropped upon his breast. Dread placed him beyond seeing and hearing.

Sabina's dread made her hearing all the more keen. Held at bay by the sounds for an instant, her hands gripped each other like loneliness holding on to loneliness. On the dark space above the stairs rose the white-haired head and the white-draped form of her mother, in a trance.

With piercing cries of pity Sabina led her mother barefooted into the room. It was like leading the dead.

Owen Mowcroft muttered oath upon oath and coiled himself away from the sight.

Only that the figure stood trembling in Sabina's arms, it might have been a corpse. It was indeed a corpse to facts. Unaware of Owen's presence, the figure coldly

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murmured, as if to Sabina's increased embraces rather than to Sabina herself, "Are—you—my son—my boy—Owen—Charles—Mereton—Mowcroft?"

Sabina called to Owen, "Speak to her. Speak!"

But he shrank more away, as if from some divine judgment-seat, with his mother as his God.

Speaking airily, as though to aerial attendants, the mother said, "I've been looking for father—dear father."

"Take her away!" commanded Owen, springing up, incapable of further volition himself.

Sabina muttered, "How dare you! Oh, how dare you!—and mother dying—see!"

"I heard him moan, moan," moaned the mother—"moan far away. I heard him as far away from me as late last night, and his voice was very cold. His cry was chill. Is father in, Sabbie? Is poor Owen in?"

In passionate desperation Owen moved to and fro as if prior to tottering over some brink which he alone could see.

"It has struck twelve. Is Owen *not* in? Wait, Sabbie; don't lock. He'll come soon. Son of my soul!"

He rushed to escape, but Sabina, still embracing her mother with one arm, seized his wrist with vehement wrath.

"Let go!" he shouted, trying to twist from her grip.

"Ah, coward!" she said, emptying all her contempt into the word as she twisted him round and called, "face her! See what you and father have made of her! Look at what you've made even of her flesh!"—and at the renewed sight of the lean, worn creature Sabina withdrew her hand from him and sobbed heavily, murmuring as she embraced her with both arms, "Oh, poor, dear mother! They do indeed curse us; they do indeed!"

"Ah?" Sabina's mother almost sang, alert with crazy delight, and moving towards the hearth. "Father? Here?"

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"No. No," answered Sabina. "No."

Owen involuntarily muttered. He was now free, but could not go. Death repelled him and yet drew him. Love itself repelled him and yet held him. He seemed to be imprisoned with the end of things, and he wept.

"He *is* here!" called his mother like a child. "I know he is. I'll find him."

"No, no, no!" cried Sabina, pained to see her stooping about the hearth.

The woman's wild wail, as of an animal pierced while browsing, filled the room.

"No, no! I'm doomed to scent him, but never, never find. And I want him—I so want him . . . before I go."

Only Sabina noticed the dim sound of a knock at the side-door down the long passage. Had the police at last heard the truth? Were they coming for Owen? She waited a moment and then placed her mother, exhausted, in Owen's chair; and Owen at last, with a show of concern for her, moved nearer.

Closing the door, Sabina went along the passage on tiptoe. At the side door she listened. Hearing a young woman crying, she called in low tones, "Who's there?"

"Is—is your brother home?"

"Why?"

"I'm anxious—I've heard something—and I haven't seen him."

It was Kitty of the Mill Stones Inn. An idea of woman's justice to a woman spurred Sabina. She opened the door, saying, with haste, "Come in."

"No, I only want to know. I heard he'd drowned—"

"Come in, come in."

"Is he home?"

"I want you."

Kitty stepped in, and Sabina closed the door.

"Some one else is coming," whispered Kitty, with a tremor.

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"Who?"

Kitty shook her head.

"A man?"

"I couldn't see. A girl, I think."

A knock like a trembling question tapped the door.

Sabina again opened it. From under a dark shawl a suppressed, rich voice said, "It's late—I'm sorry—but is it true?"

"What true?"

"Your brother!"

"*What?* Who are you?"

"*Is it?* Is he in?"

Sabina then knew that it was Millgates' Meg, and said "Yes."

Meg sighed, relieved, and turned to go.

"Here!"

"No—"

"I *want* you; come in."

Meg hesitated.

"For my sake."

Meg stepped in. She was soon shoulder to shoulder with Kitty. These two mutually confounded each other. Irrepressible shame tinged with assertive jealousy ran red between them. They were not speaking by word of mouth, and yet Sabina said:

"Hush! Listen to me. My mother is dying—"

Both visitors held back.

"Won't you come?"

"I'll come!" said Meg, moving forward. Then Kitty also moved forward; but like a captive.

To Sabina and Meg the long passage seemed short. To Kitty it was subterranean and leading to a cell. At one point Kitty halted, and Meg, losing patience with her, urged under her breath, "For shame! What's to do? Go on!"

"I won't!"

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Sabina answered, "You must!"

"I won't!"

"But we must," whispered Meg, "if she wants us."

Kitty sidled slowly forward in front of Sabina and Meg. Sabina opened the room door. No one could be seen in the room from the passage, and they entered.

Mrs. Mowcroft was standing in Owen's arms, near the fireplace. He was so absorbed in his penitential task that he did not look round. Kitty tried to back to the closed door, but Sabina intercepted her. It was then that Owen's face turned. He had to look twice. "What the— Go away!"

He struggled to free himself from his mother's embrace, but could not. He shouted at Meg and then at Kitty.

Sabina significantly pointed to her mother, whispering, "Can't you see! Wait. Be quiet!"

The mother's face was blanched, and she was murmuring.

"Hush! Be still!" added Sabina, advancing. "Dear mother!"

Meg bent her head, and then ran forward in compassion to do for the frail worn figure, still embracing Owen, what she could.

"Christ have pity!" murmured the mother, tightening her embrace as part of her words. "Have pity!—" and the three watchers suddenly closed around.

"Take her from me! take her!" appealed Owen.

But no one could have taken her from him with such a death-clasp of his neck as his mother then had.

"Have pity!" his mother now cried aloud. "Have pity—on mothers—on sisters—on all of our kind!"

Sabina kissed the white brow. Owen, in the wildest exasperation of a futile pity now too great and now too late, made a movement as if to hurl the stinging burden from him. But Sabina forestalled the act by making



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claim to the frail, lifeless form, and said in an incisive whisper, "Leave us. Go up-stairs."

He was glad to be free. He went to his room; but soon went to the garden for air.

Solemn was the hour in-doors. Sabina brought linen, and she and Meg made the long, broad sofa into a bier; while Kitty looked on helpless, without ingenuity. Sabina gave Kitty the option of leaving, but she had not impetus enough even to do that. She sat hiding her face; she walked to and fro, weeping and sighing: and Sabina and Meg performed the last sacred offices of affection to the dead.

Sabina went out to the quiet night, pulled some ivy off the house wall, a sprig or two of mint, and a few specks of white, which proved to be closed daisies.

With these about her, Sabina's mother looked so perfectly at peace at last that Sabina turned away, bent and broken. Meg embraced her soothingly, and Sabina explained, "It's because she's happier than I've seen her since I was a little girl."

Then suddenly turning the emotion of sorrow into a passion of womanly appeal, Sabina firmly stood erect, saying to Kitty, "In mercy's name, leave my brother alone! Do!" Kitty cried, as if he were lost to her.

"And you, dear child, think," Sabina appealed to Meg. Then on the quivering swell of a sigh she said, "Beware! beware!"—and just then Kitty escaped, making off.

Sabina took Meg into her arms, saying, "You are young."

"I know his wish. He *wants* to be strong."

Sabina's deep sigh was from the depths of a heart made hopeless by this very man. She stroked Meg's brow, thinking of the time when her own was as unwrinkled. In a slow undertone she repeated, "You are young—*young*;" and she thought but did not say, "He will make you old."

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Meg's arms unwittingly slackened in their hold of Sabina.

"I've disappointed you," said Sabina. "I'm sorry."

In place of speaking, Meg increased her hold upon Sabina again.

"But better to be disappointed by me—than by him."

"He *can't* disappoint *me*," lowly murmured Meg, with a struggle between her thoughts and her words; "I'm not expecting anything—I—don't *want* anything. He wishes to be different," repeated Meg, "and he says—"

"My dear, dear girl," cried Sabina, almost aloud, pityingly hugging Meg's full young form to her own spare one—sorrow's skeleton of a form once like Meg's, as Sabina did not hesitate to grimly think with every hug—"I know him, I know *all!* You don't."

"Yes; he's told me everything."

"Not everything," said Sabina. "No, no, no. Not everything."

"Often he has—while in church—playing the organ—"

"Yes, about—poor mother there?"

Both were silent, as if lest the dead might hear.

Sabina moaned in the deep, low tones of agonizing reflection, and freed herself from Meg to be isolated with the overpowering pains of retrospect. "Child," she cried, trying to suppress herself in silence, yet failing, "he could not tell you—all!"

Sabina vigorously pressed her eyes, willed her weakness away, turned abruptly to Meg, and whispered, "Always be afraid of him!"

"You make me afraid now," said Meg, glancing at the covered form on the couch, and she stood nearer Sabina. "Why, why? Tell me why?"

"*Hush,*" whispered Sabina, "*not too loud.* 'Why?' Look well at *me*; from head to foot. Feel this arm—all bone. Feel this bosom—press!—down to the bone too. I was once as you are. Fathers and brothers can do all



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this. They did it to me. My dear girl, think only of your home. Do not see him. Come, come—don't suspect me. Take my word. You are too good for him. I speak solemnly. He's my brother—that is, his father was my father, and his mother was my mother, but that's all. He has nothing more than the *look* of dear mother's eyes; it's father—father. Oh! if my father were here now, dying—dying even—I could not touch him. If *I* were dead and he touched me—I'd hope my soul would scorch his hand!"

"Don't—don't!" cried Meg.

"Ah, you only know half; you're young. *Take my word—*"

"You're keeping something back! How, how am I to know? What am I to understand?"

"You ought to understand all," said Sabina, and put out both hands. Meg took them.

"You'll not betray him?"

"No—no! Never."

"Or me?"

Meg hesitated.

Sabina abruptly flung Meg's slackened hands out of hers.

"I will not!" cried Meg.

"Here. Come here," solemnly said Sabina, going on tiptoe towards the couch and drawing Meg with her.

Turning down the coverlet, she took her mother's cold hand, saying, "Stand here; take hold with me."

Meg did so, trembling.

"You promise not to betray him, or even me?"

"I do—"

"And you still want to know?"

Meg nodded.

"Nay, you ought to know! You must know!"

"I must!" said Meg.

"Then listen. He is guilty."

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"No! I cannot believe it!"

Sabina seized Meg by the shoulders, shaking belief into her, saying, "*He* lies, I know; but I don't! He did it."

Meg shrank from Sabina's breast, sobbing.

"I'll make Owen tell you himself!"

"No—oh no—I wish I never knew it! This is worse and worse."

"No; better. Better. Now you know him."

They heard a distant door opened. They heard footsteps going up-stairs. They heard the footsteps overhead—and then a heavy fall as if upon the floor.

Meg seized Sabina's hands for companionship, and they stood listening—the eagerness to catch the faintest sound straining Sabina more erect, making her taller. They heard a moan.

Sabina ran up-stairs and was soon at Owen's door, calling him, while Meg was listening half-way up the stairs, ready to ascend if required. Through the unopened door came the shout:

"What—do—you—want?"

Without answering, Sabina turned away, descended, whispering to Meg, "He's all right."

Meg whispered, "What did you think?"

"I thought—he—was—ill—that something had happened."

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN THE NIGHT

THE consciousness that a guilty Owen Mowcroft was in the room over her head now made Meg nervous. For Sabina's sake she wanted to stay; for her own she wanted to go. The wish to go became the stronger—and yet the deep mutual embrace at parting was charged with so much compassion on Meg's side and with so much gratitude on Sabina's that Meg resolved to remain. "You're lonely," she said, "and to-night all is so strange."

"I've known far, far stranger nights than this, when to have a father and mother alive was worse—worse, dear girl!—than having them as they are. When to have a brother innocent was worse for me than to have him as he is now—guilty. Then he ignored me, cursed me, struck me—"

"Oh no!"

"Lonely, child? Who would not want to be lonely? Go home, go home!" urged Sabina. "Sleep, and waken in the morning thinking only of your home. Go! good-night!"

Meg's moody "Good-night" was merely an imitative sound.

Outside in the garden her thoughts were like four road ends meeting in her and yet striking off in opposite directions. She stealthily hastened along the narrow path between the shrubs as if that were a fifth dark road

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by which to slip out of the bewildering world. Home she would not, could not, go. Not that night, at least.

When Meg reached the door in the high garden wall, Owen Mowcroft had what seemed to her a murderous grip of her arm, but he whispered :

"Meg, Meg, the bravest girl in all this world, let us run for it!" She appealingly moaned. "To-night! Now! I'm going to make off. Come!"

Meg shrank back, shuddering, shaking her head. "I daren't!" she feebly cried. "I daren't!" she repeated, her voice vibrating to her new fears.

"Daren't?" he whispered through the darkness to her more by faith than by sight. "The bravest girl I ever knew—daren't? Meg—daren't?" and he swiftly—even roughly—kissed her. She murmured a lonely girl's futile protest, and looked longingly through the night and her tears to the black mass of the house, as if for the spirit of Sabina's strength. But the blank house sent back her wish as a wall sends back a ball.

"My Meg—daren't? I say she dare! I *know* she dare!"

"Oh—Owen! . . . Owen!"

"Let's run for it!"

"No, no, no."

"I've an offer from New York. Splendid! For my sake, Meg! In Heaven's name, for mine! To the States—California—New Zealand—any piece of God's earth but this devil's own acre!"

"Don't! Don't speak like that!" she cried, trembling. "Don't!" she repeated, preoccupied, surveying his exaggerations. But who in his horrible position would not exaggerate?

"A splendid offer from New York. New York, mind, the biggest city in the States. And what I'll have, *you'll* have, for you deserve it—you do indeed."

"Who would not flatter," she mused, "who would not



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even lie to get clear? . . . Who would not even lie to help him away from this?"

"I'm not all I might be, Meg. I know it. *You* know it. Oh, I can't be—here. But once over there—"

"Aye, if he were only safe over there. . . ."

"I'd pull myself together. I'd show what I *could* do—there! Say the word, Meg. Meg? Speak! Good Lord, don't whimper! Will you come? Yes or no. . . . Have faith in a poor fellow!"

His arms swept round her neck like a divided flood, and his face sank pressing upon hers. She felt him shake, breathing heavily, weeping like a man ashamed of weeping and yet weeping still. She soothed him until she felt him in her arms like a storm becoming becalmed. She stroked his brow. It was like stroking life asleep. He awoke to the touch. His face sought the touch—and pressed to it. An extra pressure of his arms about her and a movement of his warm breath from her cheek to her lips thrilled her with a shuddering repulsion such as she had twice had in his arms before; and yet in doubt, in pity, she allowed his arms to keep their greedy hold.

"We could get married in Liverpool. No—New York."

She wished him away. Far away. Away forever. And as his face pressed like some heavy sluggard's against hers she wearily appealed, "Don't—Owen; *please*." Then even in his arms she spiritually turned away trembling with new realizations and fears of all that this wild wooing meant for her, body and soul.

But like one who already owned her, he roughly whirled her bodily closer, his tightening embrace drawing her as into the decreasing centre of a whirlpool; and plaintively hugging her in the recurring pangs of that haunting guilt of his, he wooingly whined like a hound dreaming of its wound, wanting some new vital

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aid ; and Meg expressed her compassion in a responsive, clinging embrace.

Thankful, he lifted his face as if to front the world's darkness itself, and laughed out with a defiant joy.

But his laugh was jerked into a shriek—for the noose of a light rope closed upon his neck and was tugged, cutting short even his cry. It was slowly hauling him, indeed, up the high wall, out of the arms of Meg.

When Meg heard Ark on the wall calling to Rollie, Tom, and Tim, not to pull, she comprehended, and, as if inspired, sprang upon the first branch of the wall pear-tree, familiarly thrust her hand into Owen's vest-pocket for his knife, and cut the rope.

Ark lost his balance and fell through the darkness upon Rollie, Tom, and Tim, who had fallen nicely grouped on the lane as if to receive him. The place echoed and re-echoed with growls, oaths, and laughs.

Owen, more scared than hurt, no sooner felt the blessed earth under him again than he took to his heels with the ominous noose still round his neck like an escaped dog.

"What's up?" called Tom to any one anywhere in the dark.

"It's what's down!" cried Rollie, rising. "Ark, lad, you might have arranged to sit on anywhere else but the watch you charged me two-pound-ten for. I feel the glass in my pocket like threepenny-bits. Did the rope snip, snap, snook—or what?"

"Instead o' loopin' on to Meg's arm it caught Mowcroft by the neck."

"Good!" said Rollie ; but with the flutter of skirts and the shuffle of feet there was the smart sound of a hand, flat and full, on Rollie's plump cheek.

"Heav'ns! Is it the day o' judgment? Who's there, here, and everywhere, strikin' out o' the back, front, an' middle o' nowhere—like that?"

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Meg was heard fiercely censuring Tom and Tim, driving them before her like sheep in a fog. Then, swiftly turning to where Ark was a vague little blur of black in the dark, she simply said, "If you knew *all*, Ark, you'd be sorry for this."

"Sorry?" broke in Rollie. "By Job's patent patience, if she only had my cheek-smart as big as a breakfast-saucer on her face, she'd be sorry for me—if it *is* her loomin' and gloomin' there like a merry-go witch with a fly-wheel of a hand flarin' the dark!"

"Come you home, Meg," appealed Ark, in her direction, without seeing her. The vanishing shade of her figure as seen by Rollie implied "No."

"Meg, lass! Hi!" called Rollie, also losing trace of her. "Hang me, but she must have hit the night a smack in the eye as well, it's all so blind black! Are you there? I want to speak to you, lass."

"She's over there," whispered Tom.

"Well, if I must speak at you like one blind man at another, the next time you want to come into my door-cheek, you might just tap a little trifle gently-does-it-like, and not slap-bang at a chap's face as if his cheeks were iron-shutters with three-inch bars an' bull's-eye bolts."

"Meg, come home!" called Ark, approaching her. "Come!"

She moved out of Ark's range again, towards Rollie.

"Rollie!" cried Ark.

"Here, sir!"

Ark approached and whispered, "Thee, Tom, and Tim, go."

"Never more glad in my life, Ark, never! She's swelled my cheek till I fancy I've the double-tooth ache—by gum! You rattle a rare pound o' knuckles, lass. But wait till I catch you by yoursen! By Gollie Golliah! Just you wait!"

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Meg twisted away to run. Rollie, seeing her go, called, "Why, I'm bleeding!"

"You're not!" called Meg, stopping. To keep her, Rollie continued, "Oh, Tom! Tim! Ark! Doctor! Butcher!—lend us thay scaifs an' coats, I'm bleeding to death as I live. Dang me if my clogs ain't soppin' full already!"

"But you're not?" again called Meg.

"I am, though!"

"Where?"

"In my heart, my heart! It's bleedin' like a curran' tart. Just you come an' put your hand to this left shaft o' mine and you'll feel the little chap they call Mr. Heart tappin' away like a collier in a hot two-inch seam of fiery coal."

Ark impatiently whispered, "*Hold, Rollie! Can't you be quiet?*" and called, "Meg!"

Like a night cloud Meg slowly began to move away from the direction of home.

Rollie, on tiptoe, approached Ark and tapped him on the shoulder. He indicated that he, Tom, and Tim would hold off. Ark, with silent gratitude, pressed Rollie's arm and then followed Meg down narrow and dark Willow Row, chiefly consisting of old garden walls.

Meg moved very slowly, as if keeping step with conflicting thoughts. Ark followed, not quite abreast. He was so much under the sympathetic sway of what he fancied was her principal thought that he said, "None of us want anything but to have you home. Nothing but home. That's all."

His appeal checked her slow action into inaction. She inertly sidled against a wall, leaning there with her head down—once more imprisoned in doubt.

"All of us just want you home," he repeated, approaching so near her that within the dark shadow of her hat he could discern her eyelids opening and shut-



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ting like the wings of butterflies on her eyes like dusky flowers, now hidden and now revealed.

"All of us ; mother as well."

"She can't !"

"Meg, Meg! What to me is the good of a lie? If truth won't do between me an' you, nought will do in the end. I—wouldn't—say—false—e'en—to—get—you—home. If you want *him*—say it. Aye, say it. . . . But come home first . . . an' think it o'er. Do nought rash. Think it o'er. Give us chances to understand you, Meg. We only want to think the best and do the best. We're twistin' our wits this way an' that to know what you want. . . . *Do you want him?*"

Should she tell all she knew?

Meg slowly moved forward a single step. He followed a step. In a few moments she moved forward another. He followed again, not so much like the black shadow of her form as the shadow of her own imperfect conflict of hopelessly mingled thoughts. She took another step, and then continued slowly walking—walking down the lane into a cloudy, starless silence just before the first groping gleam of dawn. Ark felt isolated, more than ever dwarfed, as if losing grip. He felt so even as he appealed, "Can't you speak, Meg? We only want the truth ; to know where we are. *Do you want him?* Just tell me that. Is it that you can't—can't take to any one else?"

"N-o," she answered, as her hand trailed along the uneven old wall. The cold, dewy moss wet her hot fingers. It gave her shocks of contact with early associations that were pleasant, yet painful as well—reviving memories of rambles with Ark by night and day. "Only," she resumed, sorrowfully, "I want to help . . . and I've almost promised . . . promised !"

"Help, lass? Can I help? Aye, I'd help even him if I could."

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Her fingers caught a tuft of leaves. She petulantly dragged it from its cranny as she walked. She unconsciously twisted and tore it with both hands; unconsciously lifted the remnant to her lips. The rich, dewy odor of wall-flower suddenly transformed her thoughts. All the sweetness of the past was embalmed in a scent—and out from her bosom rushed the past in a sigh of childish reverie active beyond control.

Like a crescent her face turned towards Ark; but he was a stride behind, and under the shade of his wide-brimmed hat his face was indecipherable in eclipse.

With a long sigh that again filled up her young bosom with the dear breath of the sweet past, she held out her right arm, and, poised on a slower stride, waited for Ark. His face and the flower touched.

“What was that?”

She definitely pressed it to his face.

“Why, a bit of our garden, Meg!”

“Here,” she said, still holding the flower.

But the emotion in her voice had to Ark so much more of the future than of the past, that, fearing it was a farewell offering, he called, “Oh, you’re not going away, Meg?”

“I’m giving trouble, I know. I know I am; but I cannot help it.”

“You can by coming back, dear lass.”

“It’s gone too far.”

“Meg, love, tell me ought!”

“I know too much.”

“Ought! I’ll understand. Whatever it is, you’ll still be Meg to me.”

She resumed walking, as if that answer were final.

“Turn down Greenways, here, an’ then home!” he implored.

But without a word she crossed Greenways and walked on then down sloping Grimside Row.

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"Go back!" she now implored, without looking round.

"If you step down a pit-shaft, I follow, Meg."

"No, no. Go back!" she cried behind her, and ran down Grimside Row, dark and narrowing as it neared the dale. Ark also ran, like a sounding shadow following a silent one.

Meg wept aloud, running as she wept. She was like an unreachable sorrow in advance of him, increasing as it went. He was awkward—stumbling—even losing ground; but she was as fleet as a doe. It all appeared to Ark like the very last he should ever see or hear of her: and what a memory!—her arms up, her very cry carried away from him by the rising breeze. He shouted, "Meg! Meg!" But her dim figure dipped and vanished out of sight as if the earth had opened and taken her in.

"She'll be at the two-fork lanes soon!" he reflected with dread, for the lower fork led down to Merrywain's dam and the upper one to the meadows and to the Beck.

"But she has sense, surely?" he murmured in pain, desperately struggling down the ruddy lane. "She surely has her sense! She'll of course turn up for the meadows?"

He halted to listen.

"Nay!—for the dam." He sprang forward, and shrieked through the still air in the hope that, as his useless arms could not reach her, his voice would—and save her.

He heard a splash. Nay? Yea. He was sure he had! He reeled as if he himself were drowning, in darkness instead of water.

Regaining will, he again sprang forward, leaping in wild bounds of velocity as if all flesh had become soul, to save hers. In those leaps and bounds he loved her with compassionate pangs. But the tremors of momentary doom in his blood were throbbing his veins like the hot liquid tickings of her fate and his. If his strength failed—if his heart stopped—if he could not fight that



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lane—those moments—that short distance to the dam—yes, the dimness of dawn itself—she would be lost! Ah, love was great, life was mighty; and he sped as with new spiritual impetus fledged within with mighty wings. He leaped, kicking the great earth beneath him as if it were a bean.

Through the lacery of trees he caught sight of the dam, like a lake of black velvet without a ripple or fold. Beyond it, the dark purple promise of dawn was curtained with double folds of cloud.

“Too late!” he feared, as he made the final descent. But two sparrows sprang from a hedge in the chirping flight of their first crisis that dawn, and Ark concluded that she had not passed that way. He stood at the edge of the dark dam and listened. A rat leaped in, and swam towards the dawn. It seemed to draw a silken veil off the face of the dam as it went, leaving the velvet blackness in shining folds of ripples.

From an upper bank, away from the dam, to the right, there rose a shriek, mingled with separate passionate cries. They were muffled, like voices in a far-off rolling cloud—now human, now as of a beast, and now as if only the wind were whistling a long, weak whine. Never had voices taken such strange tones before. They were changed like the voice of some household pet in the throes of death. One was certainly Meg’s. He knew it. He leaped up the lane again, ran down the other fork, entered the meadow, followed the path, and found Meg helpless under an oak, heavily breathing, kept alive as if by agonies of pain. He knelt, drawing her into his arms.

A blow from behind broke his one great thought of help into several, for he heard his mother say in hoarse, low tones, like a maniac under the illusion of being weirdly wise:

“And I’ll break your bones too! Toyin’ with the flesh o’ mischief made in the shape of a woman!” A more

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violent blow broke Margit's stick on Ark's shoulder. He turned towards her in his pain and saw in grotesque black outline his mother's arm raised to strike Meg in defiance of his protection.

He raised his hand as a guard, and Margit, in a fanatical passion of superstition, with the short, knotty club struck the back of Ark's hand as if his knuckles were only a dead man's bones. He swayed in agony, and yet bent over Meg to protect.

Thwarted anger verily danced wild in the fiery little form of Margit. She turned away—once more hotly mingling with her anger her early forebodings over Meg. Here were her prophecies—coming true. Here was the judgment—dragging them all down. Here was the fate—drawing in Ark, with the evil delusions of a devotion he could never, never have returned. "She was found in *our* time," Margit muttered, lifting a big stone; "but she was made out of the darkness o' things afore the world was full-made, afore the world was full-saved."

Ark sprang to his feet, for his mother had the stone high above her head, ready to be hurled. He seized her.

"I must finish it," she cried, but a twist from Ark caused the stone to fall away from Meg. "The Almighty's put it upon me to save thee, Ark."

"Nay, nay," murmured Ark, and the two kindred dwarfed figures struggled hand to hand, body to body, and soon even limb to limb.

Between Ark's struggles and entreaties Margit called as if he were a long, long way off, but in the deadliest danger, "She'll curse thee. If her lives—you'll die."

"Mother, mother—"

"If her speaks, you'll hear thy doom. If her looks on thee, tha'lt go blind."

"Hush, hush, mother; there's a dear un! List to me."

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"If her breathes-*in* on thee, her 'll draw thee on. If her breathes-*out* on thee, her 'll dull thy life like a dead fly's last breath on our window; and her 'll do it forever an' ever."

"No—no—no. Sithee; list—"

"But I know her! Her's only in her teens, but her's been made ages ago behind the Almighty's back. Let me go!"

"I shall not, mother. You're fancyin'."

Meg, becoming partly conscious of pain, gave a little cry.

"Oh, in pity, mother—pity—be quiet—be still! Let me go to the lass."

"Nay, lad; nay!" and by her wilder grips he knew the frenzy had not passed.

"She wants help—"

"Nay, my lad; nay!" Margit repeated in a singular mental strain, and holding him firmer.

A definite moan from Meg roused Ark with exasperating impatience. "Am I to hurt and do harm to you!" he cried, struggling.

"You can't, lad. Can't! You may as well strike at God. I *am* God; or good part of Him!"

An inner shudder, as of a breeze passing from a tree to a bush, passed from mother to son. He shrank within her increased grasp. "Was it all true?" he earnestly wondered, hovering in doubt. "Did she, after all, see, know, and read things? Was there a preordained doom for Meg, as his mother and other folks talked about? Had Meg herself stood from him so because she knew her own beginning and end?"

He heard Meg breathing heavily. "Poor, poor lass! Whatever her life meant he was willing to go through it from beginning to end with her."

"Oh, confound this, mother, let me go!"

"An' let thee run to ruin on thine own legs? Nay!"

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The sound of a foot broke upon the ground. Never was Ark so grateful for the sound of man. He watched a dim form grow through the twilight. But it grew into Owen Mowcroft, panting and passionate.

"What's the meaning here?" wondered Ark, in the foreboding spirit of his mother.

When his mother saw the new arrival she exultantly cried to Ark, "Here's thy godsend, son! Let him have her . . . Take her, mester! Her was kept far away outside o' the six days' good work o' creation on purpose for thee!"

Unaware of Meg on the bank, Owen Mowcroft stood amazed, looking at mother and son muttering and struggling as if they had jumped out of the earth to intercept his course.

Ark, failing to free himself, yielded all in concern for Meg, and called, "Meg's there! There, see, under the tree! She wants help. Forget old scores. Help; give the poor lass help."

But now there were sounds of other feet. On, on came Rollie, like a heavily panting hound on the scent. With an oath, Owen Mowcroft turned to meet him, casting down his hat, ready. Ark appealed to them, but Rollie cast down his hat, saying:

"Not a word, Ark, lad; not a blow. If you see me felled dead, not a blow! Never let him say it were two to one."

"You're not going to—fight!" shouted Ark, as if forsooth he could prevent them. "It's fool's work! Meg maybe dying there while you two pitch life at one another."

Mowcroft jerked off his jacket; so did Rollie, saying, "This hot-headed chap's set on mischief; and as mischief can only be met by mischief, I mean to show that there's a blow or two more o' mischief in my arm than in his. Now mester sub-manager of the top side

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o' the earth, if you're not too proud to feel the fist of a pit lad—come on !”

Ark, like a dwarf of neutrality, wrenched himself from his mother and sprang in between their sparring.

They moved from him—hastening their sparring into fierce blows, and they closed to wrestle.

Like an imp he rushed between the arched pillars of their legs, embraced them as Samson embraced the pillars, and brought the two to earth, where they nevertheless continued the struggle. Then Ark, losing all signs of neutrality and peace, even all signs of dignity, tore up a grassy sod and wedged it like a buffer between their faces, which were touching each other in a beast-like rage. But Ark had to run to his mother, who was attacking Meg ; and with her he had a new deadly struggle of his own.

Rollie, spluttering black earth, passionately rose, and he and Mowcroft were dark against the reddening dawn again, but more like one abnormal being than two. They fought like winds : Ark, vainly struggling in his mother's arms, fearing to look, dreading to hear.

Down the fighters fell to earth with a solid double thud, Mowcroft on Rollie ; and now, with a herculean jerk, Rollie on Mowcroft—both muttering passion to passion, oath to oath, showing teeth to teeth.

“Oh, you brutes ; you sorry, sorry brutes !” cried Ark, with piteous irony. “An' God made man in His own image ! Have done ! In the name of God have done !”

But on they struggled.

“Help Meg ! Save Meg !” cried Ark as a decoy call.

But though they were fighting for Meg, Meg was secondary now ; brutal rage was supreme. Even if Meg could have called she would have called in vain. On they fought, half erect—stumbling—tumbling—rolling.

A flash of lightning straight from a black cloud struck



IN THE NIGHT

their struggling forms like a silent sword, flashed forward, and drew quick, rattling thunder in its wake.

Ark was as grateful as if some angel of peace had appeared. That would surely quell them? No. They might not have heard anything more than their own growls. They leaped to their feet, and at each other's forms. It was a wrestle of passions through every muscle and bone, every thought of the brain.


They fell heavily and wrestled on the earth even while the new big rain poured like shattered shot upon them.

Ark's brain softened within the heat of his frenzy. He felt as if being martyred—crucified—and his head sank upon his mother's breast.

A breathless chuckle soon escaped from Rollie. His passion had spent itself, and the grotesqueness of a struggle in which neither had gained a single point over the other now came to him with his customary version of fun—and this, too, when Mowcroft, whose strength was quite spent, was in Rollie's power.

"Come, Ark," said Rollie, breathing heavily, and freeing himself from Mowcroft's limp hold. "Come and give the two fools on us the riggin' we can't give each other. I'll let you loose like a terrier upon us, and you can bite ravings into me if you like, just to give me an excuse for being so mad-dog mad! Ark, d'you hear? . . . What? Ark, lad? Oh, the sin on it! . . . Mester Mowcroft! the lad's fainted in his daft mother's hold. See! Give us a hand!"

But Owen Mowcroft appeared too dazed to understand, and as Tom and Tim hastened up he moved away—as if, forgetting Meg, he had only consciousness enough to avoid another attack.



CHAPTER XXXIV

ROLLIE MORE THAN SURPRISED

IN the supernatural gloom of that slow dawn Ark revived. But none of them could win his mother over to have pity for Meg. Her fanatical passion would not cease in its erratic frenzies of warnings and threats.

"Come away! Her's one of the black brood bred i' the back of Eden by Eve and yon devil-snake as brought poor Adam the sweat on his brow. Ark! Away home with me—or to save thee I must kill thee!"

"Oh, if it 'll stop that crazy-headed, hard-hearted talk," cried Ark, "I'll come with you! I'll come."

"Aye, Ark," urged Rollie, trembling throughout his muscles and nerves after the great strain, "take mother home. Tom, Tim, and me will see well to Meg."

Ark sorrowfully looked towards Meg, still prostrate on the bank, and with a sigh he said, "I'm ready, mother. Come, an' if it 'll set thee at rest, I'll . . . I'll leave her be . . . for God Himself to do His best with her."

"But I'll try *my* hand first," put in Rollie, as Margit hugged Ark and they went home.

The sluggish twilight still only dimly penetrated the massive shadow of the low, long-armed oak, but Rollie could see that Meg was not fit to walk. The creature was even too spent to appear grateful or concerned.

"She's parched sand-dry, Tom," he remarked, in his deep, pitying tones, the more tremulous because of his still agitated nerves. "Quick, lads—quick—go an' pluck

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a wet blade o' grass or two—ought with dew on—for I know of no fit water about here."

Tom and Tim soon gathered some heads of wild clover charged like brushes with dew. With these Rollie moistened Meg's lips, and streaked her brow, and damped her palms. A small, thin ruby ring was on a finger of her left hand. It was like the eye of Mowcroft to him. Sighing, he mumbled with almost closed lips:

"Hey, Tom an' Tim, I wonder—I wonder if this bit o' gold wire and shiny stone hanks th' whole of her trouble? . . . Run, mates, good chaps, to Sarah Ann's, an' bring a can o' tea an' a blanket—ought as 'll carry her on th' three of our shoulders. While tea's makin' run an' tell Ark she's comin' round. An' she is, sithee!"

"So her is," whispered Tom, staring.

"Her is—so!" rewhispered Tim, as if Tom's whisper had not been of the true surprise tone; and he stared more intently than Tom.

"Now, lads!—give yoursens up to your racin' legs and let 'em bring you back quicker than they took you. I'll be all right, lads. Go. . . . What's up wi' you two shirkers? A good thing you don't walk with your eyes, or you'd be stuck—struck starin' still! Now, lads, leg it!"

Off they ran.

Meg, feeling a hand touching hers, shuddered, as if pain had reflected, and, in consequence, had deepened.

"It's me, Meg. Rollie. Only silly jim-crack Rollie Rondle. Sithee, girl," he said, sitting by her, "it's nought an' nobody but me. They haven't any ghosts of my make, so don't think boggarts of me. Aye, you may look full at me as best you can in this half-daylight. But think o' nought, nought. Rest. I'll have the sweetest sup o' tea for you as ever lip smacked over, soon. Arta chilled?"

She seemed too cold to answer.

To warm her, Rollie breathed along her pale brow.

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For warmth, too, he clustered her loosened brown hair about her ears and neck—a neck so soft to Rollie's sight in the dusk that he relifted the hanks of nestling hair and looked again, as one does at the confounding mellow glamour of a lily made definite for the first time in life; and the first liberated sunbeam moved in illumined silence upon her face, paused there, transformed her tearful lashes into miniature beams—beams that in turn reflected a miniature dawn in the dim, dark tarns of her half-conscious eyes. The dawn light was spectral and vanished. In a few moments a more intense ray travelled upon the autumnal forest of her brown hair, and there lit up gossamer fairy regions of coppery undergrowths and golden bowers. Her entire head was soon singled out into illumined beauty by the strengthening beams. So much so that Rollie sighed to himself a cry of the heart, "Ah, Meg, Meg!—no wonder; no wonder!" and in deepened sympathy he cushioned his side to hers and his shoulder to her head. Meg took Rollie by surprise by even helping him with bird-like nestling movements of her own. He marvelled. He wondered if Meg imagined that he was somebody else. Perhaps young Mowcroft! Maybe Ark?

"I don't mind if she thinks me a angel from heav'n," he reflected in his playful way. "I don't mind one bit, if it's bringin' her round. Who would? If it suits her, it suits me. It's a slight little wee bit o' connie cooin'; like learnin' sweetheartin' by a first-class livin' dummy!"

"Aye, lass," he said aloud, to encourage yet another nestling movement of Meg's, "have your head just as you want it. Just egzackly as you feel it on yourself an' me best. If my shoulder top's lumpy, try lower down. By Job! I wish I had a Sarah Ann pillow to tuck inside my vest; though feathers o' th' best Merry Christmas angels' wings couldn't be softer nor the feelin's inside my vest, if you could only nestle into

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them with the side of your head. I think you're warmin', lass! But whoever," he asked with a wise wink to himself—"whoever's been abusin' you so, Meg?"

Meg slowly shook her head.

"What's all the trouble about, lass? Hey? Never mind, then! If you'd rather not; don't. Keep you quiet an' still. Tom an' Tim will be here soon."

Meg actually took his hand into hers.

He was puzzled. A ghostly thought of Ark caused him to leave his hand quite passive. Upon further ghostly reflection he slowly withdrew it. But Meg repeated the act. Nay, she stroked the hand as softly as if stroking a bird. The marvellous gentleness of the repeated downward stroke, with now and then the warm pause over his fingers, transformed his tenderest feelings into the tenderest of thoughts. Some dormant rapturous emotion of his was being spoken to at last through her hand with a new-born physical eloquence of life. He could not tell whether his great tremblings were old ones from the fight and hate, or new ones from the peace and love.

"Rollie," muttered Meg, slowly, looking down, "I'm going away."

"Lass!"

"But I'll be back. *You'll* trust me?"

"Aye, would I, if you never came back? Does Ark know? But—need—you go? And where to, lass?"

"I must, Rollie."

"But you'll be back?"

"Back!"

"Aye, do. Now do, Meg! . . . for the poor little chap is fair down. Down, down he is. Give him his due, Meg! *Why don't* you give him his due, Meg?"

"Oh, Rollie—"

"What, lass?"

"Rollie! Rollie!"

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Meg hid her face upon Rollie's arm.

"It 'll go hard; as hard as flint with him if ought's wrong; hard with *all* on us."

"Nothing *is* wrong!" she cried; "but why did poor Ark ever begin to *think* of—me!"

"A lad can't help thinkin'," he said, dallying with his humor and yet musing deeply, "an' especially if a lass like you makes the thoughts. See what you've made *me* think—an' *I'm* no thinker, as you know—but see what you've made even my thick head think afore the cocks have begun to crow. Goin' away somewhere, lass?"

"Yes."

"But you *are* for comin' back?"

"Sure. Certain."

"As you are? . . . Single-like?"

"As I am."

"Then in Heav'n's name there, see, just as this queer day begins, make your mind up to come back for the best friend a lass ever had."

Meg twisted her hands in the anguish of irrevocable resistance.

"Poor chap! He's fair lost. He's shrinkin' less an' less. Though he doesn't show *half* he's goin' through."

Meg twisted her hands into still more grotesque forms.

"*Why, you like him!*" insisted Rollie, slightly slackening his hold of her. "You can't help but! Nobody could. At any rate no *man* could. What a woman can do or not do in the way of liking, only God and the women know. *I* don't. You lasses would puzzle the marryingest angel Gabriel in heav'n!"

Meg bent her face, feeling a new loneliness. It was so much in evidence that she caused Rollie to feel it.

"I always thought that you did, Meg. Always to this hour. I'd have believed it to my death."

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"Once . . . long ago . . ."

"Then, bless us all, Meg lass, if—"

"But I was young. Oh, don't! Don't ask me! Don't remind me!"

"I wasn't goin' to," he answered, in grim play. "I've no need," he added, with irony. "That confounded Mowcroft is everything!" he said, with pathetic jealousy.

Meg flung her arms around his neck, and before Rollie was fully aware of all that either he or she meant his arms were around her.

But even in the depths of this impulse Meg's thought of Ark caused a shrinking halt. Midway in her caress Rollie felt this like the better half of a whole kept back. He was puzzled. He doubted her. Was this action of hers true? or was she only pretending—using him—for some urgent plan of her own?

Meg, forsooth, untrue to truth, untrue to herself, untrue to everything but a revival of ineradicable sympathy for Ark, twisted away and cried, "Oh, it's lies—lies! Don't believe me!"

"I didn't, lass," bluntly answered Rollie, piqued by her inscrutable waywardness. "But what—in—the—world o' wonders—do—you—mean?"

"I ought to be one Meg for *fear* and love, one for *pity* and love, and one for nothing but love alone. Rollie, Rollie! why was I found by *his* father!"

"Now how do you mean *that*, dear lass? You fair baffle me. At any rate," he glibly said to cover the rush of deeper thoughts, "my father could not have found you unless he came from his grave. Mrs. Dootson has been my father, and mother too. I don't know how many mothers! Step-mother, front-door-mother, kitchen-mother, parlor-mother, god-mother, wellnigh mother-in-law, an' mother-out-o'-law—ev'ry kind o' son's grand kind o' mother you can set your mind to think on! But



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you're gettin' chilled again, Meg ; an' Tom an' Tim don't come. Let's go. You can walk if I help?"

"Not home," she said, with quiet pleading. "To Sarah Ann's—to Mrs. Dootson's. Sarah Ann understands."

Rollie half seriously commented, "Well, you take some understandin'. You say some misunderstandin' queerish queer things at off times, Meg. One would have to spy into the Day-o'-Judgment book to pick out what things o' thine's meant, and what things a fellow must take with a dang big breakfast-cupful o' sea-water salt."

"Oh, Rollie!" she murmured, revived.

Meg required help to walk; so Rollie fitted his arm under hers, and thus they went through the spreading light most of the way to Sarah Ann's.

They walked apart through Brink-o'-Dale, and they entered Sarah Ann's in single file, Rollie boldly going first like a flushed cloud in advance of an early morning storm.

CHAPTER XXXV

A NEW PHASE

NEXT Sunday morning Tom and Tim were up on a remnant of moorland overgrown with gorse on the "Off Brink Side o' Boggart's Head."

Even if they were quite unoccupied, their Sunday morning always seemed more like Sunday morning up there among the bushes and birds, surveying with local surmises the doings of a village smoking in silent miniature two miles away.

But the Sunday morning up there always seemed most like itself to Tom and Tim when, as on this occasion, they were leisurely trying to snare some of the carols of the day in the feathery form of linnets and larks.

Their machinery was very simple : a little decoy linnet in a little toy cage ; a little bird-limed bush ; and themselves made as little as possible by lying flat in a hollow with only their faces like small living sphinxes perched on their fists above the level of the earth. They were never seriously concerned whether they caught birdies or not. The quest was only a kind of practical poetry—a way of inviting Nature to give them an occasional crisis more exciting than themselves when in prosaic idleness.

Even when alone, Tom and Tim's conversation was as usual confined to their obvious platitudinarian twitters of wisdom which not even a moor sparrow would attempt to controvert by a third variety of note in its chirp.

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For some time that Sunday morning their resource seemed less than usual. Their interchange of ideas consisted of sighs—apparently unconnected exclamations of “Aye, aye!” and “Well, well!” This they varied by the abrupt criticism repeated now and then upon affairs well understood :

“It’s queer, Tim.”

“Queer.”

“It bangs all.”

“All.”

“Doesta think,” at last muttered Tim at phenomenal length, with his chin on the pedestal of his fists and his eyes watching the bird-limed twig while the decoy linnet in the cage was twittering like an innocent syren—“doesta think, Tom, that Ark *has* a real downright touchy thought for Meg? Or *is* he harkin’ back only because o’ Margit?”

“Arta at it again?” muttered Tom, with his chin also on his fists, his eyes and ears intent on a cock linnet swaying the pliable branch of a dwarfed hawthorn. “An’ how doesta mean real thought? There’s no mock thought.”

“What would you call Mowcroft’s?” asked Tim.

“A sight too real, by all accounts.”

“Aye, Tom—when you put it that way.”

“Ark’s pretendin’, I tell you.”

“Pretendin’, Tom?”

“He’s mockin’ that he doesn’t care, when the poor chap’s caring like a foot in a tight Sunday boot, like to mine, dang it;” and Tom kicked as if at the universe with his toe.

“Aye, Tom?”

“My belief is as Ark thinks that Meg thinks as he’s too far gone an’ old for the likes of her.”

“Aye? Think so?”

“Well, think for yoursen, lad! A chap as is nigh thirty-

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two to a lass as is on'y nigh nineteen has a length o' time ahead of her ; she's more *my* fit, or thine."

"He has, Tom, when you put it that way. But then Ark is mostly young—in his ways."

"But haven't you noticed his beard coming?"

"Well—yes ; but—"

"But or no, but he means turnin' hissen away from her. Yon wary cock linny has tasted birdlime with his feet afore, Tim. He holds off."

"But sithee!" muttered Tim, rising and running like a stooping Indian to another limed twig where he took off a bird like plucking a plum. He tipped up its beak with his finger and let the bird go, calling, "A hen, Tom. Only a hen."

Tom chuckled.

Tim returned and stretched into full-length position again.

"Aye," moralized Tom, with great fulness for him, "if us chaps could only fling away a lass as easy as you flung yon hen, there'd be no glum Arks among us."

"Nor glum Toms nayther," said Tim.

"You're not so *unglum* yoursen. Hullo, Rollie Randle!"

"You two body-snatchers!" said Rollie, giving Tom's and Tim's calves friendly whacks with his Sunday ash-plant. "Hasta heard the Sunday news? Ark's goin' to the pit i' the mornin'."

"Nay, Rollie!"

"Rollie—nay! He were not up when we left th' house. Who told thee, Rollie?"

"Ark hissen."

"Well, I *am* sorry," said Tim, deeply.

"It 'll be torments to Ark, Rollie."

"That it will ; and more," said Rollie.

"I thought," remarked Tom, mystified, "that Ark were goin' to struggle on with clockin', an' finish yon

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double-catch an' try Manchester with it, seein' as they'll have nought of it at th' office here?"

"Double-catch or single-catch," answered Rollie, casting himself down on the grass, "he starts i' black-bunk up by me in the mornin'."

"Margit didn't seem to know when we left after breakfast," said Tom.

"She didn't, Tom," Tim confirmed. "But did her look like knowin' ought this side o' sense?"

"She's goin' queerer."

"Queerer an' queerer. . . . An' where's Meg, Rollie?"

"Choirin' at church I suppose—hang it! She left Sarah Ann's to go to church afore I were up."

"An' what were Ark after, when you called at the Mill House?"

"Up-stairs fettlin' an' polishin' his old pit bread-tin."

"My sakes! That's sign enough. But he's a heart in him," murmured Tom.

"A heart deep down," added Tim.

"Aye," said Rollie, rolling over on his back and shading the sun from his eyes. "Aye, he has. Only, confound it all, Ark's heart is so deep in him that it's down a sort o' three-hundred-and-fifty-foot shaft, then up a two-mile main-way's, then down a dip, then up a jigger, then o'er a 'fault,' and then in a fiery two-foot skew-wiff seam. Aye! an' he's so close, it would take a God-Almighty explosion of the whole lad to find it!"

Tom and Tim chuckled.

"Aye. An' a fool's folly of a fix it 'll be," continued Rollie, warmly, "for a lass like Meg, hoaxin' betwixt a manager an' his man; one in black cloth an' t'other in black skin; one goin' fatter an' redder, with a curly hair on his lip just to hook any silly trout of a wench, an' t'other goin' thinner an' whiter, an' tryin' to lose his old sen under a three days' grizzle of a beard. A fool of a fix—for us all!"

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"Now doesta really think, Rollie, lad," asked Tom, "that Ark cares for the lass—after all? *I'm* doubtin' it, now."

"So do I, Tom," followed Tim.

"Cares for her?" answered Rollie, still on his back and shading his eyes. "Cares for her! Cares? The poor lad cares as much for Meg as a man cares for his own head when he's going to be hanged. Only Mowcroft's touched her in some way since that farce of a trial."

"Her's more sorry like," suggested Tom.

"An' as Meg thinks for him, Ark thinks for Meg, hold-in' off to give her her wish," explained Tim.

"As we'd hold off to give Ark his," said Tom, with a wink towards Rollie but meant for Tim.

"An' that's where we all are," growled Rollie from the grass. "All of us are everywhere and there's nobody nowhere! Ev'ry one of us would do; an' there's none of us does! But what the world are you two chaps bait-in' for? I'll bet a dollar there's a cock bird splutterin' on the twig if you can spare time to think on it, off Meg. I do believe th' two on ye are fooled o'er with her your-sens!"

"So there is!" cried Tom, rising, and he ran for his prize. "A this year 'un!" he called, slipping the bird into the mouth of a long blue stocking, knotting it as he returned.

"By Jove," murmured Rollie, in reverie, still on his back, "but you're a singy sing-song birdie, bonny lark! If I could only clap hands on you I'd give you a wood-an'-wire parlor at Sarah Ann's all to yoursen. You'd be a Sunday all the week for us. E'n Meg would say it weren't cruel to cap an' cage thee, bonny un! . . . Heigh, heigh, it's a million-an'-one pities Ark can't hit the mark with one of his machinings."

"Pity?" repeated Tom, as if testing the sound of the word as an adequate expression of his own feelings.

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"Pity?" exclaimed Tim, as if the word certainly fell far short of his own particular emotion, though quite unable to supply a word that did not.

"I do believe, lads," said Rollie, in an exaggerated vein, "if Ark could trim up a bit with some machine as would *take*—an' bring the brass in—an' make folk talk—an' set hissen off—an' rig Meg in fancy folderoy-riglimagigs—and grow a curly-whurly on his lip—an' take her summerin' to Blackpool—an' give her two-horse wagonette drives—an' always have bachelor dumplin's for dinner an' bridescakes for tea—I tell you straight, that if Ark could do all this, little an' queer though he is, Mester Owen Mowcroft, manager though he is, might go to grass an' turn green, for her!"

"He—might—just—as—well—go—to—grass, Rollie," slowly and sadly said Tom.

"Just as well? Better!" added Tim, with the unusual point of a little revision.

"Nay, I don't believe it," called Rollie, recanting. "It isn't brass as is against Ark at all. Nor does she favor Mowcroft for brass. No. For what outside of Kingdom Come had he, or has he! The poor sticks of Broomhey furniture has been auctioned—an' he's lodging like a lost Lord Tom Toddy at the Mill Stones Inn. So what in the name of having *has* he but his post?—an' that's runnin' to liquor."

"By all I see an' hear," confirmed Tom.

"Fast," added Tim; "I wonder at the governor's keepin' him on."

"How the blessed hangman is it that *everybody* keeps him, on?" cried Rollie, with impatience—"office, lasses, parson, an' all! An' Meg keeps him on just because he does take to the drink, I do believe."

"He talks them o'er," suggested Tom.

"More like he cries them o'er," said Rollie. "That's how he huggle-juggles with Meg, yet— It's a pity Ark

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hadn't a ready-made tear or two, a stock o' whimpers, an' a tongue-load o' glib words. Dang me if I won't use the likes mysen !"

"She'd think you were cryin' with laughin', Rollie."

Rollie dreamily gazed over towards the gorse bushes. Then he bent his face deep into the grass for some time. During that pause only the chattering linnets seemed to talk.

"Rollie," began Tom, as he once more very cautiously winked at Tim, "have you noticed ought new about Ark, lately?"

"He's dropped shaving," said Rollie, without raising his face.

"Ought else?"

"He has a calf-lick o' gray hair comin'."

"Nought else?"

"He's making believe that Meg's nought to him, to let Margit cool down." Rollie now suspected Tom's tack, and, with his face still in the grass, he closed his lips tightly and inflated his cheeks with high-pressure air, by way of occupation for his suppressed energy.

"But have you noticed nought else, *like* to that?" asked Tom, with an interpretative tone which he thought could not fail to be understood.

"Like to *what*?" asked Rollie, with a secret grimace to the earth.

Tim nudged Tom not to say anything. Tom signalled that he would exercise the utmost discretion.

"Like to what?" repeated Rollie, rolling to and fro. Then from the close, fine grass he called, "You mean he's off his food?"

"Ah, Rollie, you're trickin'!" called Tom.

"I'll swear he is," said Tim.

Tom ventured to most earnestly ask, "Do you think much about it, Rollie?"

"Much on what?"

MEG OF THE SCARLET FOOT

"Now you know! . . . Doesn't he, Tim?"

"Of course he does."

"I'll give thee both a tug i' th' lug if tha forces me to know more nor I do know."

"Rollie, lad, Ark *knows* that Meg thinks of—thee. That's the change in him, lad."

"Tha'rt mistaken!—mistaken—both on ye! As mistaken— Why, I were— Both on ye! I were with Ark up to eleven last night, an' he were as straight wi' me— Pooh! Thee two don't understand *him* nor *me*; nor *Meg*! Not a bit. Tha'rt foxin' wi' fancies. Both on ye. An' have done with it."

"But, Rollie—"

"Now have done with it, that's all!"

Tom and Tim simultaneously looked at each other. They simultaneously winked. In precisely the same degree they jerked their heads knowingly towards Rollie—jerks which meant, "Understand? Don't we! And you better than all, Rollie Rondle, good chap."

CHAPTER XXXVI

ARK'S WORK

At a quarter to six next morning Tom overtook Rollie on the black path skirting Blue Beck fields. Both were hastening towards the pit where the elevated winding-pulleys in the first vigorous morning rays were flying round like the burnt boss of a great Fifth-of-November "Sunflower." The rays also lit even the black woolly-looking smoke coiling out of the tall chimney with cloud-like beauty as it broadened on the westward breeze.

"Where's Ark?" asked Rollie, as if incidentally, as he increased his speed.

"He left the house at half-past five, so Margit said. I wanted to be in place by six, as well."

"So did I, Tom," answered Rollie. "Hullo, Teddy Mottram? You whippin' up, too? Ho, ho, and Dicky Thornton? And Will Starkie?—and you married, and faithered with six childer? Well, it's a laggard's consolation to see an early bird like Will Starkie a bit late. Dang you, provender tin!—ride in the small o' my back as you always do do, canta! Well, there'll be a cageful of us, lads. Hullo? one more? That's right, lass, run for it! Run! Hey, how bright th' iron of your clogs is, wench!"

The girl asked as she ran, "Hasta seen our Nathan ahead?"

"No, what's amiss?" called Teddy Mottram. "Is thy fayther worse?"

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"No; I'm late," and on the girl ran in advance.

"Her's a nice wench is Bess—hey, Teddy?" said Rollie, with a nudge at Dicky Thornton's arm.

"I hope so," said Teddy.

"You seemed to know it last night, lad," commented Dicky Thornton, "when you were towing her along Brimster Canal path."

Up went pleasant groans and murmurs of friendly irony.

"Towing her, hey?" remarked Rollie. "I s'pose with one rope round th' waist and another hooked fast on to her hand? I know how that sort o' towing's done—most by the figure-head."

"I should think, Rollie, you do know—when you've done it thasen," remarked middle-aged Will Starkie. "I wern't crossin' by th' two-fork lanes t'other mornin' for nothin'! Only you were towin' *thy* Bess, whoever she were, sittin' down."

"Ho! ho!" called Teddy Mottram—"trust to Rollie doing it as easy as life can."

"An' why *not* take it easy?" asked Rollie, with rather a struggle to be easy just then. "Why not?"

"But I never knew that Rollie Rondle coorted!" called Tom.

"Some folk," said Rollie, "don't know when they're coortin', themselves!"

"I'd bet a day's wage you'd know, Rollie," ventured Dicky.

"I knew a chap," answered Rollie, "as went to stand as best man an' didn't know he were standin' as th' husband till the parson asked him for the ring. Now that were a fellow half wed an' didn't know it. Can we catch yon cage?" asked Rollie, as five of them hastened up the platform steps.

They were too late, for they only reached the platform in time to see the cage-man switch off the check,

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turn his face to the driver in the engine-house, and signal "Right"; and down went the cage while two steel ropes vibrated from the black mouth of the shaft up to the big winding-pulleys, the pulleys whizzing in reverse directions in the coal-black head-gearing nearly forty feet aloft.

In a few minutes up came, as with an exultant spring, an empty cage for another load of men.

"In with thee, mates," said the cage-man, swinging open the iron guard. "In with thee! Right?"

"Right, Joe," was Rollie's answer from the cage. The check was withdrawn and the freighted cage swung ready, suspended on the vibrating steel rope, the massive hook holding the cage like a parrot's beak closed.

"Right," signalled Joe to the engine-man, and the engine-man pulled his lever. But instead of the cage dipping with the usual momentary pause and then descending as if with delight, it shot up, over-wound, into the head-gearing, with the five men shouting, dreading a crash among the beams.

But there was no crash among the beams. At a point of safety, by a clever arrangement a copper rivet was cut, setting free the lower parrot-like jaw of that hook which would otherwise have drawn Rollie, Tom, and their mates to possible destruction among the timbers aloft. Quite cleverly the cage descended towards four corner catches constructed to fall into position to hold the cage like a bed between the four posts of the frame. But the catches failed to fall—and swifter than thought, for the cage-man did not think quickly enough to again "shut the shaft," down flashed the cage with its shrieking freight, past the cage-man, past the seven-foot seam, past the long seam, past the low seam—down, down with quickening, rackety, jolting speed through four hundred yards of darkness and shadow of death that made both body and spirit crave to die—till with splintering crash



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and wreck the cage shot through the platform at the bottom, to fall yet again thirty black yards deeper, smashed in the sump-hole, the lowest, dark, watery depth of all.

Down there all human sounds were mysteriously be-dumbed. There was not even a moan. Only Nature spoke through its laws of gravitation in the final fall of a piece of splintered wood, or the splash of water, or the clang of a liberated bar of iron.

The first human sound down that horrible sump-hole accompanied the first glimmer of a Davy lamp, and that was in Ark's hand.

He had heard the thundering, rackety sound and the wild shrieks when on his way to his cutting, and he ran back, knowing what had happened. Others followed, descending into the hole with a compassion that fought their horror for noble mastery.

They found the wrecked cage, as Joe Ashworth put it, "like a smashed-up box o' worms."

The dim, shadowy sights of human wreck, and the bloody odor of his doomed mates, made Ark shout aloud in horror. Another strong man verily sobbed in the ungovernable pain of his pity. Yet another groaned oaths of the fiercest exasperation that seemed to turn that sump-hole, with its living and its dead, into some bottommost pit of torments for collier souls.

Ark, after his first cry, only for his dogged activity, lifting broken timber and bent iron, might have been dead, he was so silent. Silently he worked deeper into the wreckage, clearing it from forms he could now see below.

At last he was face to face with the grimmer duty. He was within reach of the first bit of humanity. It was a detached head, the back of which he failed to recognize. He lifted it, turned it, and from between his hands the blanched face of Rollie Rondle looked up at him as if from a far-off region of silent quietude. It

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was like holding death as well as life, for dear Rollie's head was still warm.

A sweat of wellnigh fatal agony sprang hot upon Ark's brow and suddenly chilled there, for this, this he had but a few hours ago learned from his fretful mother, was the head of the most cherished loved one in all the world to Meg.

"God help her now!" he thought, stroking back the soiled fair hair. The other helpers glanced round, saying under their breath, "Yon's poor Rollie?—Aye, Rollie! Dear Rollie Rondle."

Down the sump-hole by a rope swiftly came five sacks.

"The lass must never, never see him brought to this!" moaned Ark. "No, no!" But, taking out his knife, he cut off the only little tuft of shining fair hair that was free from dirt or blood, and put it in his pocket as a keepsake for Meg.

Seeking for Rollie's body, Ark found it with two loose arms gripping it. "Part of poor, poor Tom!" sobbed Ark, passing them to the second labelled sack.

Under Rollie's broken hip was his dinner-tin, crushed as if it had been a tin of soft clay.

Will Starkie's hands were crushed into his own face, while his bent Davy lamp had to be taken out of his side.

On, on the grim and gruesome labor of affectionate selecting bravely went; the love of man for man, the compassion of pain for pain, giving to commonplace men—mere miners—poor colliers—strength for a task for which no commonplace strength of body, mind, or soul would have sufficed.

On, on it went until five sewn-up sacks represented five men—"Five as good, cheery souls as ever sought coal for bread," said Ark, as the cage with the five sacks covered with black tarpaulin slowly moved upward into



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the darkness of the coal-dust-powdered shaft, like an ascending funeral from a half-lit region of lower earth.

At the top, most of the weeping little world of Brink-o'-Dale awaited them in sure confidence of nothing but death—and death that could not even be looked upon.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ARK SEES

"Not a word," said Ark, with solemn appeal to the other rescuers—"not a word above ground of *how* we found the dear lads."

"What's the use?" said Joe Ashworth. "'Twould be the death o' Becca Starkie if her knowed the number o' pieces of her Will."

"Will wouldn't wish her to know."

"Lads, lads," solemnly added Noah Haydock, like a verbal codicil to a last will and testament already known, "if by th' visitation of th' Almighty I'm ever found as we picked up yon five—keep it at the back o' thy tongues."

"Husht!" whispered Harry Winwick, the under deputy, turning with his lamp from the shaft towards the main black haulage-way. The faint light of the lamp tapered off into the darkness of an inscrutable tunnel; the tunnel making hearing almost as blank as sight. "Hark!"

"What?"

"Where?"

"A—"

"Hold thy gibble-gabble!" Winwick commanded.

"To be sure," added Noah Haydock, in meditative support, "if Providence itsen took voice to itsen, some of you would expect to hear it through your mouths instead of through your ears."

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"Wilta let me listen, Noah?" called Winwick. "Hark, now!"

A far-off hollow, owl-like call reached them by stages of half-spent vibrations of sound.

Joe Ashworth whispered, "A bird, think ye?"

"It caps all birds or any other sound I ever heard, over ground or under!" gasped Noah, as fresh vibrations became clearer. "I used to hear my granny tell o' pit-women ghosts."

"Bless my heart," cried Ark, "it's mother!" and they heard the far-off rippling sound of rapid feet. "How has she managed it!"

"By the down-cast shaft, of course, and round by hell-hole," impatiently said Winwick. "But what does she or any woman want here?"

"Hide your lights," called Ark, "and let's try and see hers."

They stared into the unrelieved darkness.

"She's nearin', though," said Ark—"the air's comin' on in front of her. D'you feel it?"

"I *see* it! But what does she want here?" again complained Winwick. A dim oval glare as of a low moon emerging from haze came travelling through the formless blackness.

Instead of Margit a flushed, wild maiden of darkness and light, and fretful wails, evolved as a vision on the void—and Meg, unable to speak, fell panting into Ark's arms.

Ark involuntarily muttered, "He's gone up, dear lass."

"Up? Up?" she cried, disappointed.

"Aye!" shouted Noah, hysterically, his voice at full pitch in the high key-note of his feelings. "Up to heav'n, lass! You may as well know it first as last, for it's the first an' last we have to tell thee. The Lord hissen has Rollie, now."

"Rollie! Oh, Rollie!"

ARK SEES

"He made him," said Noah; "He broke him, an' He'll mend him."

"Husht!" whispered Ark.

"Where is he?" she appealed. "Ark! Tell me."

"Calm, Meg. Calm. Calm yourself."

Meg thrust forward her lamp like a little search spirit on her own behalf, appealing, "Let me see him!"

"Nay, nay," sorrowfully answered Ark, as the men murmured and stood closer. "Nay. Never again. Never on the Brink-o'-Dale side o' th' grave, Meg."

She screamed as if within herself, and hid her face.

"Let me touch him," she cried—"here—in the dark." And she cast down her lamp as if the light itself stood between her and Rollie.

"Listen, dear lass, listen," persuaded Ark. "Keep thee quiet. Listen. I'd give you Rollie a thousand times o'er if I could."

"Aye!" cried Noah.

"We would so," said another.

"But the lads are in the cage—in the cage, Meg, goin' up the shaft. List, you can hear it."

"I *want* to hear it!" she childishly answered.

"Then try. Husht, men, husht! Now hark at it, Meg."

The creaking sound of the slow, invisible ascent was, after all, like death and doom made audible to Meg, and she moaned, turning away in full realization of the utter hopelessness of it all.

"You must give up thoughts of *lookin'* on him, Meg," urged Ark, softly. "You must, indeed."

"Nobody but the jury should look on 'em," called out Joe.

"I doubt e'en them," added Winwick.

"But why give up thoughts, Ark? I *will* see him!"

"If you did," shouted Noah, trembling with the fervor of memory, "you'd wish your eyes from off th' front

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o' your brains, and your head not in touch with your heart !"

"Who's to blame?" she fiercely demanded, stung into a new phase of passion. "Who did it? Who, Ark? Tell me; for it shall be bone for bone!"

"Nay, nay, lass. Not *one* pair of hands did it," opined Ark; "not one head, only, has helped. If it comes to all-an'-all, I have had a share."

"No, no," called Winwick. "You mean Mowcroft—"

Meg felt as if she had been hit, and called, "How? How Mowcroft?"

But Winwick did not answer, and Ark continued, "Oh, when I think of it! If only I'd have spoken out more for my double catches at the office, Rollie, Tom, Will Starkie, Teddy Mottram, and Dicky Thornton would have been cage-caught up there instead of dropped down here. To think on it!"

Meg uttered a wail of regret.

"To think that I sent the invention to Manchester—out o' Brink-o'-Dale!"

"Nonsense!" repeated Winwick, vigorously, supported by the other men. "They wouldn't take it; what else could you do? Who ought to have seen to the single catches? That's more to the point. Mowcroft; and I'll tell it to his face."

"Talk as you like," said Ark, deeply—"talk as you like; but I could put on the grave of the five o' them, 'Killed for Want of Ark Millgate's Double Catches.' But come out o' this up the other shaft, Meg."

"Show me where they were found!"

"Now, then, Ark Millgate," ordered Winwick, "get her away. You can't see the place, dear lass. If the devil hissen were flaming there, you'd scarce see him, for it's thirty-odd yards down yon hole."

Meg twisted towards the place and the men grouped against her.



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"Let her but peep," urged Ark, "just a peep. She'll be more satisfied."

They agreed. Ark took one of Meg's hands, and Winwick the other. The rest held her by the skirt at the back, and they all advanced to the mouth of the sump-hole. Ark and Winwick held their lamps over it. The light appeared to be tangibly resisted and cast back by the gassy density of the darkness. The weak, flickering flares, moving to and fro but not penetrating one degree lower, made the cavernous depth look deeper, more horrible, more cruel than even her most active imagination had flashed upon her agony. With a frantic leap forward and shriek she tried to twist forward from their grips.

Defeated, Meg fell back into their arms.

She could not understand the why and wherefore of such a doom. Her impassioned thoughts, trying to solve it, were left helplessly dangling in her brain—in space and time—unable to penetrate to the other side of eternity and death. Was Mowcroft guilty of this too? "If she could but die and see—and know!" was the thought which gave a second shriek its shrillest thrill of anguish; and she seemed grateful to even faint, so as to shun the grim abyss of dark destiny which love, pity, anguish, and even wrath and hate, could not fathom.

At that same moment, Ark, with overwhelming pity, daringly thought, "She'll do no good without him. Poor soul! 'Twould be a mercy if she had a death call, too."

And yet Meg, yielding again to the inscrutable doom associated by Winwick with Owen Mowcroft, wanting to receive solace as well as to give it, cast herself low upon Ark's neck, pleading, "Take me home! Home!"

The eight partly illumined figures, each with a lamp as of life—and of death—silently entered the main roadway like Christians going deeper into the modern catacombs of an inextinguishable daring and faith.

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They solemnly walked two and two, now like shadow, now like substance, now a metamorphosis of both. The interior of the planet seemed to be their temple, each a priest, each a worshipper—nay, each like some mystical angel—each even like a God made man—wending through their own wondrously wrought labyrinth; passing on the right and on the left narrow, dark chapels lit as with the halo of a sanctuary lamp implying some unseen man at work—chapels not of ease, but of labor, sometimes of bloody sweat, with the haunting tick of the distant pick, the growl of the grinding drill, the crack of rock, the thud of fallen stones, the mysterious persistent drip of quiet water—and, mingled with it all, the living sound of human song and speech, as of beings in the shut-off cloisters and cells of Brink-o-Dale monastic pit.


As they went farther into the mine, within the main rumble of the place, the rattling sound of jolting pit-boxes—trucks—drawn by a pony on tram lines, grew definite.

The trucks approached. They stopped. Out of the first truck sprang Owen Mowcroft in his capacity as assistant manager. In the light of the lamps he was haggard and pale. Meg fancied he looked guilty. She trembled with conflict and stepped back—to think, to feel. Thought fed her as if with flame of rage for Rolli's doom; and like flame she passionately burst forward towards him.

He seized her wrist.

"Here, Mester Mowcroft!" called Ark, "not a touch more o' that!" Meg, by a passionate fit of physical force, wrenched her wrist from Mowcroft's grip and stood nearer Ark.

Owen Mowcroft's face, under the changing flares of the lamps, took on a shadowy look of black venom, having a central expression in the glassy glint of fierce ani-



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mal light in his bloodshot eyes after a recent debauch. But in that moment the old, old pity for all he had inherited returned to Meg.

"Out of this, all of you!" said Mowcroft, bitterly.

"Nay, nay," said Ark. "Don't you speak rash to the likes of us as have just seen an' done a bit of your *un*-seeing and *undoing* if all we hear is true. Have you ever set thought, eyes, or hands on yon upper cage catches since you've managed?"

"Why, those catches," said Winwick, "wouldn't work if God hissen were in the cage! I've seen them. When the cage were over-wound the safety hook itsen were nought but a trigger o' death."

Meg hid her face and whined to herself as if no solace could possibly reach her pain. But with great relief in a new thought she called, "He didn't *mean* it; he didn't *do* it!"

"Of course not," answered Mowcroft, with grateful sincerity and yet trembling with partial guilt. "I admit I didn't see to the catches; but that's not purposely killing five poor fellows in a cage. Why should I?"

"Why, indeed!" cried Meg, pitying the inner cry of his trembling voice.

"Why?" added Ark.

"But if you'd have given to the catches some of the time you've given to the Mill Stones Inn," began Winwick, looking into his Davy lamp—

Instead of continuing, a twist of curbed surprise came to his lips. The blue of the flame was unusually deep and long. He glanced at Ark's lamp. "Ho, ho!" he muttered. With the tranquil concern of familiarity with the fluctuating dangers of a mine, he noted that the rush of the air was increasing and was more charged with coal-dust. The facets of the dust gleamed like intangible motes as they swiftly floated through the flare of the

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lamps. But now and then in their swiftness they stung the face as if with electric needle-points.

The blue flame soon gave startling evidence of travelling eddies of gas. Winwick, Ark, and Mowcroft simultaneously shouted, "Back! Back!" Ark, thrusting his arm through Meg's, urged a quick return.

Far-off rumblings and rolls were heard, continuing like a prowling lion with its roars.

"Back!—and quicker than yon roar!" shouted Winwick. For answer the travelling vibrations of the roll passed under their feet and over their heads, shaking from the roof the fluffy combustible films of accumulated coal-dust.

Back all desperately ran — Mowcroft now like a subdued wolf scared into companionship with the sheep. He also offered help to Meg; and Meg and Ark silently accepted it, for nearing them was the hollow howl and moan, not as of a lion now, but as of a mighty gale cooped in haulage ways, cuttings, and tunnels too small for its tempestuous force. They heard it roaring and racing. They soon felt it forcing a column of hot air like a herald of some inferno in advance; and lo, a travelling gale of fire, red and yellow at the core with a phosphorescent arch of blue, as the fine explosive coal-dust of the roof and sides answered to the travelling flame, suddenly lit up their path.

"Down!" shouted Winwick. The doom had raced them. "Down!"

Ark, with a cry, gripped Meg.

"For your life, flat to the earth!" he said. "Cover your face—breathe in your sleeve—and don't give up!"

The gale of fire travelled over them with explosive squalls of gas—wrenching timbers, turning trucks, ripping up tram lines, spinning tubs; treating pit-man, pit-pony, and pit-rat as it treated stone, iron, and wood.

"Keep close and down!" shouted Winwick.



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"Aye," implored Ark to Meg, "keep you to me!" And as they both huddled nearer, faces down, she pityingly muttered, "Where is *he*?"

"Somewhere near," whispered Ark, overawed by a flaring blast of gas.

"Here!" Ark and Meg heard Mowcroft say in husky nearness by their close heads, and a groping hot hand, feverishly trembling, was pushed between their faces; and there it quivered like some representative of fate, persistent to the last.

"All right, mester!" called Ark, and they were heated by a flaring blast of gas and dust lit by the travelling flame. "Don't lift your face, Meg." The gale of gaseous fire flamed into a red hurricane roaring along the roof immediately above them—travelling on—turning back—storm-proud of the gusts of new gas and veritable winds of fresh flame flashing from out of the hollows of the walls.

Every long-drawn breath of Ark's was an immature prayer, even though his muffled voice called, "Don't give in one bit o' life, Meg! Hold on to it. Think o' Brink-o'-Dale fields! You'll have a look at them this afternoon. She's about roarin' her worst. What's this to bein' drowned down i' th' ocean without a bit o' land to grip hold on except at the bottom? I'd sooner fight wi' fire nor sea any day!"

Meg tried hard to hope. But every sigh of hers was a partial giving up of the ghost, for she was panting, slowly suffocating in the cast-off floating heat which momentarily threatened to become actual flame like that roaring above.

As the nearest approach to a cheery hymn with the element of prayer in it, Ark sang into his sleeve, like a snatch of combined emotional hope, defiance, and despair, "God save our gracious Queen! May she reign o'er us! God save the Queen!" breaking into the fer-



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vent shout, "And God save *us*—all of us—e'en the poor Winwick's ponies—aye, save yon poor squeaking rats if they crave life before death!"

All the fire that passed over them, all the hurricane far and near, and all the volcanic thunder cooped in the pit now seemed to join forces to split the planet to be free.

"Meg," called Ark, grasping her arm with a grip which under other circumstances would have been cruel, "*yon's* the worst. It's wellnigh o'er, now. We'll have one of our old walks over Boggart's Head to-night!"

A strange new thrill of admiration, which seemed related to love and life, revived Meg's will. "Where have been my eyes?" she demanded from herself. "Where my thoughts? Where my whole life? I could sink down into death—here—now—with brave, honest Ark," and, gently weeping, sorrowful because she had taken so long to learn, and that Ark had so suffered while she learned, she nestled nearer and clung harder. Nevertheless, pity for Mowcroft filled up the rest of her thought.

Disturbed Nature, however, did not pause in its fury because of her love or her pity. The very earth shook its loins as in revolt, to rebel against its own long suffering, to that heedless Universe in whose strange system it had been set against its will. With thunderous fundamental quakes all the pursed-up leviathan life of the previous epochs appeared to live again in rock, timber, and coal. The primeval forests seemed to be moving, again demanding air, sun, moon, stars, and a sight of space.

"Lord in the heav'n o' heav'ns!" inaudibly murmured Ark in the innermost mute prayer of that mystical little entity the soul, apparently retreating into the very beats of Ark's heart to suspend and swing there in the last movements of hope—that fluttering heart itself in refuge in the trembling body; that trembling body fast within



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the great troubled earth ; and the very earth, like a fiery heart, suspended in space, pulsating with passionate events in the lives of the worlds.

As Ark listened, craving to hear signs of exhaustion in the forces at war, the poor little man-made trucks in which the small band of men had so recently driven, were snatched up by pit winds and blasts, but tugged as if by pre-historic beasts running delirious with new freedom after their long stone-like sleep—leaping, bounding, rearing even to the pit roof to fall backward in shattered silent heaps of spent energy and life. There was a bodily silting movement of the massed timbers, and Meg shrieked with the pain of a new pressure at her feet.

The fierce hurricane of flame had passed ; yet lines of props still fell as if the roof and floor had moved in contrary directions ; roofage dropped in heaps, crushing still more timbers about Ark, Meg, and Winwick and his band, whose cries, already muffled in their jackets, were no more to the greater sounds than if ants whispered their loudest in their burrows beneath thunder-claps that shook down the roof and walls of their miniature mines.

The last prop fell like the last dead man. The last piece of rock dropped like the spent, worn heart of the wrecked pit. A stillness filled space as when a night storm has swept and breathed its last. In that stillness Owen Mowcroft called, " Father !— Mother !— Sabina ! Forgive ; forgive. God have mercy on my soul."

Meg's lamp had burned out. Ark's was shut off from his reach by wreckage, and all was dark to him. But he beheld Meg better than by sight—in a passionate vision of gratitude, for she was still living. All the keenest emotions of life—life which seemed love, love which again seemed life, the supreme totality of being—sped through his being, bound though it was. Living?

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Was not her breathing breast alive against his shoulder; and her hot cheek moulded as if molten flesh upon his brow—nay, on his half-delirious hold on life? They were indeed, but with Owen Mowcroft's hand partly wedged between Meg's cheek and Ark's brow; and not so much by any little human acts of theirs, as by the huge, stern acts of the elemental forces which had pressed them nearer and nearer, at last fixing them immovable under a resistless mass which bound but did not crush.

But gratitude, alas, was helpless. Ark's arms were bound outstretched, as if away from him. Like separate things, with a pity of their own, they longed to enfold Meg. But they were held down from even embracing his own poor body, which therefore seemed the more exposed to fate. His lips and palate were parched, coated black with dust. Soon, indeed, all was black to Ark. A swift fever of fear oozed over him even to the palms of his outstretched hands, for he realized that the horror of faintness was coming upon him.

He, like Meg, was feverish with the after-damp, that gaseous blast, as after the firing of a gun, which was slowly probing its foul atmospheric feelers even through the piled-up timbers and earth, and passing like expanding fumes into the lungs. Death's own breath, indeed, was reaching them as an inevitable part of their breath of life. Already his lower limbs were out of the range of his will—eerily quivering, with a separate and resistless will of their own.

He knew the final probabilities now! Hot tears, bursting like lava up from his pangs of farewell, washed pink channels through the dry dust of his discolored face.

And yet, a little of the pure air of the far-off breezes and sunshine seemed to separate from the pit fumes and to pass clarified through the little storehouses of the brain, for miniature pictures, with the vividness of flowers, floated within him, and yet without, as if both the

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within and the without were one, and as if distance were also near.

In celestial clearness he saw his home as it used to be: the geranium in the sun-lit window—his mother speaking as of old by finger signs to his father—generous Mrs. Dootson—Rollie Rondle—the baby Meg—her nursing—the child Meg—the walks down by Silver Streak and up on Boggart's Head—the toys and the Saturday-night games in the Old Mill kitchen.

"Oh, Meg," he mentally murmured, almost without sign or sound, "we may not live through *this*; but if death does come, dear, dear lass, *may* I pass away in love wi' thee?"

Her bosom, with a long inhalation for a sigh, pressed his shoulder.

"Her means it! Then I'm ready, God! Amen."

Ark's becalmed thoughts hung within him like dangling sails waiting without impetus for wind and wave. His dead calm seemed to have visions of its own, visions of a high arching blue sky with regions of white cloud, and the imagined Light of Light in the half-revealed Beyond. And far, far away up there, hovering within the half-revealed Beyond, was a familiar little presence; but tranquillized, spiritualized, serenely looking down through the gaps in the white clouds, through the blue space, through the green of the earth, through the darkness of that choked cavern of Brink-o'-Dale pit—gazing down with motherly eyes far tenderer than of yore, fuller of the light of the divine comprehension of life; understanding, now, the outward and visible signs of life, the inner invisible signs of death, and the intermingling signs and wonders of that love which conceives life, nurtures life, and passes with it triumphant through death to the source of it all.

A too-human sigh he breathed, and the heavenly vision gasped out like a reflection of heaven on a burst



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bubble, and Ark sank wholly unconscious, a human blank.

As the air became purer he slowly revived. Then it fouled again, and the thick material fume alone seemed to pass through his brain and to play upon it as though upon a human Æolian harp, humming tunes of madness. It coiled in upon him a violent black vision of delirium. He was in the hell of hells with Owen Mowcroft. He was there drunk with him. Satan doomed them to a duel with swords of flame. But, instead of fighting with pitiful Mowcroft, Ark by divine intervention took on the stature of Goliath and had combat with Satan himself, and so vanquished him with swords of his own fiery element that Mowcroft fell grateful upon Ark's neck. But yet again Ark sank unconscious, nearer than ever to the threshold of death.

The foul air again became partially purified, and the stifling pressure was gradually withdrawn from Ark's lungs and brain. Even unconsciousness felt it and lived towards consciousness again.

Ark once more beheld the far-off white clouds. Yes, and the familiar little presence. His semi-consciousness perceived that up in yonder illumined region all life can be seen as it really is. There the spirit is not scared by the crow's caw, the cricket's creakings, or the dog's bark, or by the birth-mark on a poor human foot. It sees through mere appearance; it hears through mere sounds. He perceived that there the spirit realizes that even if they are signs of death—what of it? That if they are not signs of death—again what of it? He saw that there the spirit clearly beholds that Life, Death, Eternity, and Space are inseparably mingled in continuous unity; that they have no vital demarcations as given by the fears of man in his childhood of



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spiritual growth, for each moment, like each breath, like each act, dies into the last—nay, lives unto the next.

Ark was happy in all this. Pain did not torture. Death had no dread, Life no fears. The earth had no allurements superior to the allurements beyond it. Even love had become unified. All was at one with the soul. God and the smallest atom were in perfect accord. . . . He could either live for Meg or die for the loved ones gone before. Not his will, but the will of Providence over all the mysteries!—and Ark awaited whatever message heaven or earth might have.

Ark, as if newly awake, heard a moan—nay, he felt it in Owen's hand near his face. The hand turned cold. It curled up like a withered leaf upon his brow, but heavy and cold as if filled with snow, and rested there inert. With a shudder of thought too sacred to become action or sound, Ark knew that the life that had been in it was gone; and an appealing prayer of his tried to race the departed spirit of Owen Mowcroft to the Mercy Seat of the Great Judge of all.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

MARGIT HEARS

AT dusk that evening, though the more feverish anxieties at the pit head were about the creatures in the fired workings, there was an eerie interest of haunted sorrow centred about a black colliery shed where the five sacks were concealed.

The door of this temporary tomb was guarded by three policemen, lest the sobbing pangs of the mothers, widows, sweethearts, and sisters, waiting there as at the black and terrible blank of eternity, should become hysterical, and force some creature to make a desperate claim to its dear own—the more endeared because maimed in death against all the thoughts and wishes of love.

A pit horse and cart, like a rough-and-ready hearse, were backed to the shed door, still kept closed: a very simple act, and yet having links with the profoundest problems of love, the tenderest sensibilities of life. At the sight of it, sob, sob—sob upon sob—broke from the women in individual and yet collective tremors of fathomless grief.

At last, at last, the grim duty had to be done. The shed door was opened as if it were the door of darkness and of fate, and the women fell upon one another's necks.

The elderly women implored Mrs. Starkie to go away with them. "No, no, no," she wept, "I mun see my poor, dear, broken Will."

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Four men entered the shed. They lifted from the floor the first labelled sack, and Mrs. Starkie, craving for something definite for her grief, cried aloud, "Lord God! Who is it they lift?"

A policeman patted her shoulder and whispered, "*Rollie Rondle.*"

Sallie Dootson heard this and cast up her arms with a shriek, and Mrs. Dootson gripped her daughter to her bosom with a mother's love steeled for the occasion to be greater than grief all the sore time that Rollie Rondle was being reverently placed in the cart.

One of the four bearers of the second sack whispered in advance:

"Will Starkie. Hold his missis!"

But Mrs. Starkie too swiftly fell moaning on her knees with her hands and head to the earth; and the two elderly women with affectionate force carried her groaning with new agonies of her own to a shed.

In that pit shed, while the pit cart was conveying its sacred load over a field towards Pit Head Farm, followed by a panting, wan crowd held at bay by six policemen, a child was born—fatherless, and well-nigh motherless, too.

At Pit Head Farm an out-house near the stables had been hastily cleared and the floor strewn with sawdust. Into that the five sacks were carried, the door was closed upon them, and three policemen stood on guard.

The policemen were on guard all night, pacing to and fro. All night, too, five women watched, sitting on stones as near the out-house door as the police guard would allow—desperate in their fidelity, immovable in their love.

In the farm-house itself other women, speaking in whispers and with tearful signs and nods, were busy sewing white-linen sheets into coffin-like shapes to cover the crude roughness of the sacks with something of human respect for the dead.



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Most of that night, feverish with new noises, the farm dog whined. Now and then he had spells of tugging at his chain in the direction of the closed out-house door. All night, too, a cow, scenting death, periodically bellowed its questioning dread in the direction of the shippen door, its rests from bellowing being occupied in anxiously licking its trembling calf. The whole place indeed seemed tremulously aware of death and doom.

Mrs. Dootson left Sallie sitting on a stone in the farm-yard to go to Margit at the pit head again. She found Margit moving away from the crowd still watching the belching shaft in the dark, and still waiting for news from the entombed beings below.

"I'm goin' to wear mysen home to be near my bed, Sarah Ann. My Noah died out of his bed, as you know too well, and how and why; an' a quiet notion has come to me through the earth from Ark that he has died out of his bed, too. Somethin's callin' me. I'm goin' to be near my bed, ready."

"We must all be ready, mornin', noon, and night," said Mrs. Dootson, walking with Margit, "but we can't all be standin' nigh our beds dyin' every moment of our lives, dear woman."

"I suppose Rollie *has* 'gone'? There's been no comin' back, Sarah Ann?"

"Back? Back, Margit! Husht, woman, husht!"

"Why not? You never know. At times I think my Noah might walk into the round kitchen even yet."

"Poor Rollie back, indeed? No, no. Our Sallie's well-nigh 'gone,' too. Her an' the other are sittin' in the farm-yard like live stones on dead ones."

"No wonder. *No* wonder! My head, Sarah Ann Dootson, is like a dead stone on a livin' one. There's somethin' in this night's air as is queer. Queer. I feel trembles. Not *on* me, Sarah Ann. No. Outside. Away. As if the Almighty had an angel's wing in His hand

MARGIT HEARS

fannin' the stars into heats to reach some of us folk on this cold old earth. Some on it reaches me. Feel my hand, Sarah Ann—as hot as a star itsen, an' with a twinklin' inside it as twicks my heart to tick like two. *Some-*thin's happ'nin', for God's walkin' with me as much as He did with the Bible Noah."

"You're thinkin' too much, Margit."

"*I'm* not thinkin'. 'Tisn't me. How oft in my life-time, Sarah Ann, have I told you that? You ought to have it off by heart *and* head by this. Who am *I* to think? A poor four or five foot thing like me! I wouldn't dare to think these new things, if I could. Wouldn't dare it, Sarah Ann. An' if it's not me as is thinkin', somebody else must be doing it, for thought is here—there—everywhere—all about me. Mere flesh and bone can't do it for itsen. No, no. I take it the Almighty is walkin' with me, Sarah Ann. He's maybe come for me. An' no wonder; for I'm more than wellnigh ready. Ready, dear Sarah Ann. Ready!"

When they reached the Old Mill House, Margit acted as if dreams surrounded her. Mrs. Dootson wanted her to rest. But Margit could not rest. With a big family Bible in her arms she walked the round of the circular table in the kitchen. Three times she did this.

Then, taking a candle, she went up-stairs to Ark's room.

Mrs. Dootson followed her like following a child better managed by being humored.

"See," said Margit, looking through the window and pointing at the reddish moon rising like a big wooden shoe above hazy Boggart's Head. "Sarah Ann, if that isna the last of the Scarlet Foot on this here old earth, what is?"

"Now, Margit, come, come; it's nought but God's own common-sense moon a little bit red."

"I have my thoughts, Sarah Ann. Thoughts. The lass is the age of her mother when she witched my Noah

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this very day how many years of time back? Where is Meg? An' where's my poor Ark?"

"Don't think of it, Margit; come down and have supper. I'm famishin' wantin', mysen. What have you in the cupboard, Margit? Come and see."

"Nay; go an' help yoursen, lass. I've eaten my last. I'm goin' to sleep my last; an' cry my last in my son Ark's own bed," she said, undressing, "for my own bed, Sarah Ann, is feather-down, and maybe pigeons' feathers, some on it; an' pigeons' feathers keep dyin' folk alive against their will and past their due time—till the gates of heaven are closed, they say."

"Well, if you *will* go to bed, Margit," said Mrs. Dootson, on second thoughts, in the hope that sleep would bring the wearied mind and body of the little woman peace and rest before the arrival of Ark—whether dead, alive, or maimed, who could say?

"Is it rainin', Sarah Ann? Look."

"Clear fine, except o'er Boggart's Head."

"Then, is the window open?"

"No."

"Strange," said Margit, going on her knees at the bedside; "I smelt rain an' church-yard grass. Somethin' is callin' me. Callin' an' callin'," repeated Margit, mingling with the phrases mumblings of prayer.

Getting into bed, she said, in tones moody and remote, "If I *am* called away, Sarah Ann, love, the last good thing of earth you can do for me is this—list, hear to this: when they're goin' to bier me over to the church-yard there, put yon Sunday suit of Ark's in beside me. Close. He's died away from me like his father, I do believe; but I know the mother in me will live right through death, and will want to feel him as nigh an' near as only mothers can. . . . Hey, Sarah, Sarah, you needna tuck me in. This night I'm goin' to be warm in Paradise. Sarah Ann—a kiss, love!"

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"Good-night, Margit," answered Sarah Ann, kissing her.

"Good, good night !"

Sarah Ann then went down with the candle.

Mrs. Dootson stood in the round kitchen, counting on her fingers the number of people likely to want food there after the long fast of terror and grief.

"Our Sallie—if she comes. Meg—if *she* comes. Margit—when she wakes. Tim ; aye, poor, lone Tim without his Tom. *Say Ark. An' mysen. That's six.*"

She thought of silent Rollie Rondle and sighed deeply, going to the drawer for the white cloth, for relief. Waving it over the table, she thought of Rollie yet again, brooding generously on the many, many times she had waved a cloth over a table for his ever-ready appetite and ever-ready good-humor and wit. Suddenly gathering the cloth towards her in a heap on the table, she bent her face into it and wept with silent Rollie Rondle a long, long time.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE BROKEN MUSIC

A POSTMAN'S quick knock startled Mrs. Dootson from the table. In her excitement she carried the table-cloth to the door. In the same agitation she imagined that the letter addressed to Ark was from Ark, opened it, and with great effort read, "Please call here to-morrow at two o'clock to consider terms for the right to adopt your plan of double catches for pit shafts."

"The letter from Manchester he's been waiting for," muttered Mrs. Dootson. "I do hope to merciful Heaven it's not too late for the lad. . . . I *must* tell Margit. Margit could take it to the pit head," she thought going up-stairs; "they'd pass the news down — it would fairly give the lad life."

It was too late for Margit. She had passed away. Nevertheless, a remarkable expression of ultimate wisdom on her tranquil face seemed to imply that she was fully aware of all.

But the good news from Manchester was not too late for Ark and Meg. They appropriately heard it when they were travelling in a pit-cage up the shaft. Meg, however, heard it so faintly that she could not comprehend, for she was white and faint from loss of blood. A foot — her scarlet foot — had been snapped off at the ankle-joint by one of the moving timbers of the mine.

After three days of indefinite consciousness of mysterious pain in bed, Meg asked what had really happened;



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and then Ark and Mrs. Dootson, who had for days fortified themselves for one of the most trying moments in their lives, told her all.

Meg's fortitude amazed them—shamed them. They exchanged glances of the most grateful surprise as they noted that though her face had the reminiscent lines and pallor of all the strife and pangs she had passed through in recent years, her eyes had a vision of some maturer wisdom of the spirit as she lay gazing towards Ark and yet not definitely at him.

It was strange, very strange, Meg peacefully mused in secret, but this loss to them did not seem like loss to her. True, one poor physical foot had gone ; but fleet spiritual wings of the very soul had come instead. In the sight of the world—yes, even in her own little worldly sight—she confessed that she was humbled, humiliated ; but to the inner vision which saw beyond she gloried in the revelation that she was elevated into angelic realms of newer life. By imperfection she was more perfect—crippled, she was healed. She had conquered all the past, and from that hour started the future afresh. All vain compromises with the vanities of the physical world had gone from her forever. She saw clearly that though everything on the earth had form, form was not everything ; she even felt that the highest of her being was without visible form, and that it was so with Ark's.

Her eyes now definitely settled upon Ark, who was hopefully trying to comprehend the merely suggested movements of her joyous thought. But she thought of the long reign of all his worthiness, and her purely earthly sense of her new physical flaw made her shrink from the noble fidelity clear in his eyes, and she hid her face.

He pressed her hand—spirit seemed to touch spirit—lo, the flaw was as nought ! The higher life was all. She was more worthy of Ark in the profounder depths



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of love than she had ever been, and her clear, frank, foretelling gaze fully confessed that she was there in all good earnestness of heart for ought he could make of her ; and when her two hands sprang forth for his the broken music of mortal life in each was made full, harmonious, and complete upon that deeply touched instrument of divine hope, the immortal soul. She called for her violin and fervently tried to express something of all this in a strain ; but, instead, she fell over the instrument upon her knees, too overjoyed. But silence again sweetly expressed it all in an embrace and a kiss.

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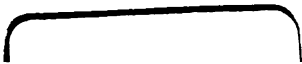
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